“Die boek nooi jou uit na ’n avontuur van ’n reis waarop wetenskap en geloof saamstap.”
– Professor Christina Landman, teoloog



Bewys van die Hemel

’n Neurochirurg se reis na die hiernamaals

EBEN ALEXANDER, MD

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"Dr. Eben Alexander's near-death experience is the most astounding I have heard in more than four decades of studying this phenomenon. [He] is living proof of an afterlife."
— Raymond A. Moody, Jr., M.D., Ph.D., author of *Life After Life*



PROOF
HEAVE

A Neurosurgeon's Journe
into the Afterlife

EBEN ALEXANDER, M.D

This book is dedicated to all of my loving family, with boundless gratitude.

Hierdie boek word met groot dankbaarheid aan my liefdevolle gesin en familie opgedra.

Prologue

A man should look for what is, and not for what he thinks should be.

—Albert Einstein (1879–1955)

When I was a kid, I would often dream of flying.

Most of the time I'd be standing out in my yard at night, looking up at the stars, when out of the blue I'd start floating upward. The first few inches happened automatically. But soon I'd notice that the higher I got, the more my progress depended on me—on what *I* did. If I got too excited, too swept away by the experience, I would plummet back to the ground . . . hard. But if I played it cool, took it all in stride, then off I would go, faster and faster, up into the starry sky.

Maybe those dreams were part of the reason why, as I got older, I fell in love with airplanes and rockets—with anything that might get me back up there in the world above this one. When our family flew, my face was pressed flat to the plane's window from takeoff to landing. In the summer of 1968, when I was fourteen, I spent all the money I'd earned mowing lawns on a set of sailplane lessons with a guy named Gus Street at Strawberry Hill, a little grass strip "airport" just west of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the town where I grew up. I still remember the feeling of my heart pounding as I pulled the big cherry-red knob that unhooked the rope connecting me to the towplane and banked my sailplane toward the field. It was the first time I had ever felt truly alone and free. Most of my friends got that feeling in cars, but for my money being a thousand feet up in a sailplane beat that thrill a hundred times over.

In college in the 1970s I joined the University of North Carolina sport parachuting (or skydiving) team. It felt like a secret brotherhood—a group of people who knew about something special and magical.

My first jump was terrifying, and the second even more so. But by my twelfth jump, when I stepped out the door and had to fall for more than a thousand feet before opening my parachute (my first "ten second delay"), I knew I was home. I made 365 parachute jumps in college and logged more than three and a half hours in free fall, mainly in formations with up to twenty-five fellow jumpers. Although I stopped jumping in 1976, I continued to enjoy vivid dreams about skydiving, which were always pleasant.

The best jumps were often late in the afternoon, when the sun was starting to sink beneath the horizon. It's hard to describe the feeling I would get on those jumps: a feeling of getting close to something that I could never quite name but that I knew I had to have more of. It wasn't solitude exactly, because the way we dived actually wasn't all that solitary. We'd jump five, six, sometimes ten or twelve people at a time, building free-fall formations. The bigger and the more challenging, the better.

One beautiful autumn Saturday in 1975, the rest of the UNC jumpers and I teamed up with some of our friends at a paracenter in eastern North Carolina for some formations. On our penultimate jump of the day, out of a D18 Beechcraft at 10,500 feet, we made a ten-man snowflake. We managed to get ourselves into complete formation before we passed 7,000 feet, and thus were able to enjoy a full eighteen seconds of flying the formation down a clear chasm between two towering cumulus clouds before breaking apart at 3,500 feet and tracking away from each other to open our chutes.

By the time we hit the ground, the sun was down. But by hustling into another plane and taking off again quickly, we managed to get back up into the last of the sun's rays and do a second sunset jump. For this one, two junior members were getting their first shot at flying into formation—that is, joining it from the outside rather than being the base or pin man (which is easier because your job is essentially to fall straight down while everyone else maneuvers toward you). It was exciting for the two junior members, but also for those of us who were more seasoned, because we were building the team, adding to the experience of jumpers who'd later be capable of joining us for even bigger formations.

I was to be the last man out in a six-man star attempt above the runways of the small airport just outside Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. The guy directly in front of me was named Chuck. Chuck was fairly experienced at "relative work," or RW—that is, building

free-fall formations. We were still in sunshine at 7,500 feet, but a mile and a half below us the streetlights were blinking on. Twilight jumps were always sublime and this was clearly going to be a beautiful one.

Even though I'd be exiting the plane a mere second or so behind Chuck, I'd have to move fast to catch up with everyone. I'd rocket straight down headfirst for the first seven seconds or so. This would make me drop almost 100 miles per hour faster than my friends so that I could be right there with them after they had built the initial formation.

Normal procedure for RW jumps was for all jumpers to break apart at 3,500 feet and track away from the formation for maximum separation. Each would then "wave off" with his arms (signaling imminent deployment of his parachute), turn to look above to make sure no others were above him, then pull the rip cord.

"Three, two, one . . . go!"

The first four jumpers exited, then Chuck and I followed close behind. Upside down in a full-head dive and approaching terminal velocity, I smiled as I saw the sun setting for the second time that day. After streaking down to the others, my plan was to slam on the air brakes by throwing out my arms (we had fabric wings from wrists to hips that gave tremendous resistance when fully inflated at high speed) and aiming my jumpsuit's bell-bottomed sleeves and pant legs straight into the oncoming air.

But I never had the chance.

Plummeting toward the formation, I saw that one of the new guys had come in too fast. Maybe falling rapidly between nearby clouds had him a little spooked—it reminded him that he was moving about two hundred feet per second toward that giant planet below, partially shrouded in the gathering darkness. Rather than slowly joining the edge of the formation, he'd barreled in and knocked everybody loose. Now all five other jumpers were tumbling out of control.

They were also much too close together. A skydiver leaves a super-turbulent stream of low-pressure air behind him. If a jumper gets into that trail, he instantly speeds up and can crash into the person below him. That, in turn, can make both jumpers accelerate and slam into anyone who might be below *them*. In short, it's a recipe for disaster.

I angled my body and tracked away from the group to avoid the tumbling mess. I maneuvered until I was falling right over "the spot," a magical point on the ground above which we were to open our parachutes for the leisurely two-minute descent.

I looked over and was relieved to see that the disoriented jumpers were now also tracking away from each other, dispersing the deadly clump.

Chuck was there among them. To my surprise, he was coming straight in my direction. He stopped directly beneath me. With all of the group's tumbling, we were passing through 2,000 feet elevation more quickly than Chuck had anticipated. Maybe he thought he was lucky and didn't have to follow the rules—exactly.

He must not see me. The thought barely had time to go through my head before Chuck's colorful pilot chute blossomed out of his backpack. His pilot chute caught the 120-mph breeze coming around him and shot straight toward me, pulling his main parachute in its sleeve right behind it.

From the instant I saw Chuck's pilot chute emerge, I had a fraction of a second to react. For it would take less than a second to tumble through his deploying main parachute, and—quite likely—right into Chuck himself. At that speed, if I hit his arm or his leg I would take it right off, dealing myself a fatal blow in the process. If I hit him directly, both our bodies would essentially explode.

People say things move more slowly in situations like this, and they're right. My mind watched the action in the microseconds that followed as if it were watching a movie in slow motion.

The instant I saw the pilot chute, my arms flew to my sides and I straightened my body into a head dive, bending ever so slightly at the hips. The verticality gave me increased speed, and the bend allowed my body to add first a little, then a blast of horizontal motion as my body became an efficient wing, sending me zipping past Chuck just in front of his colorful blossoming Para-Commander parachute.

I passed him going at over 150 miles per hour, or 220 feet per second. Given that speed, I doubt he saw the expression on my face. But if he had, he would have seen a look of sheer astonishment. Somehow I had reacted in microseconds to a situation that, had I actually had time to think about it, would have been much too complex for me to deal with.

And yet . . . I *had* dealt with it, and we both landed safely. It was as if, presented with a situation that required more than its usual ability to respond, my brain had become, for a moment, superpowered.

How had I done it? Over the course of my twenty-plus-year career in academic neurosurgery—of studying the brain, observing how it works, and operating on it—I have had plenty of opportunities to

ponder this very question. I finally chalked it up to the fact that the brain is truly an extraordinary device: more extraordinary than we can even guess.

I realize now that the real answer to that question is much more profound. But I had to go through a complete metamorphosis of my life and worldview to glimpse that answer. This book is about the events that changed my mind on the matter. They convinced me that, as marvelous a mechanism as the brain is, it was not my brain that saved my life that day at all. What sprang into action the second Chuck's chute started to open was another, much deeper part of me. A part that could move so fast because it was not stuck in time at all, the way the brain and body are.

This was the same part of me, in fact, that had made me so homesick for the skies as a kid. It's not only the smartest part of us, but the deepest part as well, yet for most of my adult life I was unable to believe in it.

But I do believe now, and the pages that follow will tell you why.

I'm a neurosurgeon.

I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1976 with a major in chemistry and earned my M.D. at Duke University Medical School in 1980. During my eleven years of medical school and residency training at Duke as well as Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard, I focused on neuroendocrinology, the study of the interactions between the nervous system and the endocrine system—the series of glands that release the hormones that direct most of your body's activities. I also spent two of those eleven years investigating how blood vessels in one area of the brain react pathologically when there is bleeding into it from an aneurysm—a syndrome known as cerebral vasospasm.

After completing a fellowship in cerebrovascular neurosurgery in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in the United Kingdom, I spent fifteen years on the faculty of Harvard Medical School as an associate professor of surgery, with a specialization in neurosurgery. During those years I operated on countless patients, many of them with severe, life-threatening brain conditions.

Most of my research work involved the development of advanced technical procedures like stereotactic radiosurgery, a technique that allows surgeons to precisely guide beams of radiation to specific

targets deep in the brain without affecting adjacent areas. I also helped develop magnetic resonance image–guided neurosurgical procedures instrumental in repairing hard-to-treat brain conditions like tumors and vascular disorders. During those years I also authored or coauthored more than 150 chapters and papers for peer-reviewed medical journals and presented my findings at more than two hundred medical conferences around the world.

In short, I devoted myself to science. Using the tools of modern medicine to help and to heal people, and to learn more about the workings of the human body and brain, was my life's calling. I felt immeasurably lucky to have found it. More important, I had a beautiful wife and two lovely children, and while I was in many ways married to my work, I did not neglect my family, which I considered the other great blessing in my life. On many counts I was a very lucky man, and I knew it.

On November 10, 2008, however, at age fifty-four, my luck seemed to run out. I was struck by a rare illness and thrown into a coma for seven days. During that time, my entire neocortex—the outer surface of the brain, the part that makes us human—was shut down. Inoperative. In essence, absent.

When your brain is absent, you are absent, too. As a neurosurgeon, I'd heard many stories over the years of people who had strange experiences, usually after suffering cardiac arrest: stories of traveling to mysterious, wonderful landscapes; of talking to dead relatives—even of meeting God Himself.

Wonderful stuff, no question. But all of it, in my opinion, was pure fantasy. What caused the otherworldly types of experiences that such people so often report? I didn't claim to know, but I did know that they were brain-based. All of consciousness is. If you don't have a working brain, you can't be conscious.

This is because the brain is the machine that produces consciousness in the first place. When the machine breaks down, consciousness stops. As vastly complicated and mysterious as the actual mechanics of brain processes are, in essence the matter is as simple as that. Pull the plug and the TV goes dead. The show is over, no matter how much you might have been enjoying it.

Or so I would have told you before my own brain crashed.

During my coma my brain wasn't working improperly—it wasn't working *at all*. I now believe that this might have been what was responsible for the depth and intensity of the near-death experience

(NDE) that I myself underwent during it. Many of the NDEs reported happen when a person's heart has shut down for a while. In those cases, the neocortex is temporarily inactivated, but generally not too damaged, provided that the flow of oxygenated blood is restored through cardiopulmonary resuscitation or reactivation of cardiac function within four minutes or so. But in my case, the neocortex was out of the picture. I was encountering the reality of a world of consciousness that existed *completely free of the limitations of my physical brain.*

Mine was in some ways a perfect storm of near-death experiences. As a practicing neurosurgeon with decades of research and hands-on work in the operating room behind me, I was in a better-than-average position to judge not only the reality but also the *implications* of what happened to me.

Those implications are tremendous beyond description. My experience showed me that the death of the body and the brain are not the end of consciousness, that human experience continues beyond the grave. More important, it continues under the gaze of a God who loves and cares about each one of us and about where the universe itself and all the beings within it are ultimately going.

The place I went was real. Real in a way that makes the life we're living here and now completely dreamlike by comparison. This doesn't mean I don't value the life I'm living now, however. In fact, I value it more than I ever did before. I do so because I now see it in its true context.

This life isn't meaningless. But we can't see that fact from here—at least most of the time. What happened to me while I was in that coma is hands-down the most important story I will ever tell. But it's a tricky story to tell because it is so foreign to ordinary understanding. I can't simply shout it from the rooftops. At the same time, my conclusions are based on a medical analysis of my experience, and on my familiarity with the most advanced concepts in brain science and consciousness studies. Once I realized the truth behind my journey, I knew I *had* to tell it. Doing so properly has become the chief task of my life.

That's not to say I've abandoned my medical work and my life as a neurosurgeon. But now that I have been privileged to understand that our life does not end with the death of the body or the brain, I see it as my duty, my calling, to tell people about what I saw beyond the body and beyond this earth. I am especially eager to tell my story to

the people who might have heard stories similar to mine before and wanted to believe them, but had not been able to fully do so.

It is to these people, more than any other, that I direct this book, and the message within it. What I have to tell you is as important as anything anyone will ever tell you, and it's true.

Voorwoord

A man should look for what is, and not for what he thinks should be.
ALBERT EINSTEIN (1879-1955)

Toe ek 'n kind was, het ek dikwels gedroom dat ek vlieg.

Gewoonlik het ek saans in ons agterplaas na die sterre staan en kyk en dan, meteens, sou ek begin opstyg. Die eerste twee duim het sommer vanself gebeur. Maar gou het ek agtergekom dat hoe hoër ek styg, hoe meer het my vordering van my afgehang – van wat *ek* doen. As ek te opgewonde raak, te begeesterd raak deur die ervaring, het ek teruggeval aarde toe … hard. Maar as ek koelkop bly, dit vat soos dit kom, het ek al hoe vinniger in die sterrehemel opgestyg.

Miskien was hierdie drome een van die redes waarom ek, toe ek groter word, op vliegtuie en vuurpyle versot was – op enigiets wat my kan meevoer na die wêreld daar bo. As ons gesin iewers heen sou vlieg, was my gesig plat teen die kajuitvenster gedruk, van die oomblik dat ons opstyg totdat ons land. Gedurende die somer van 1968, toe ek veertien was, het ek al die geld wat ek met gras sny verdien het, uitgegee op sweeftuiglesse. Die instrukteur was 'n man met die naam Gus Street, by Strawberry Hill, 'n vliegveld met 'n grasaanloopbaan, net wes van Winston-Salem, Noord-Carolina, die dorp waar ek grootgeword het. Ek onthou nog goed hoe my hart in my keel geklop het toe ek die groot rooi knop uittrek wat die tou van die sleeptuig loshaak en ek my sweeftuig in die rigting van die vliegveld laat kantel. Dit was die eerste keer ooit dat ek werklik alleen en vry gevoel het. Die meeste van my vriende het daardie gevoel gekry as hulle motor bestuur, maar niks het vir my gekom by die

sensasie om duisend voet bo die aarde te sweef nie.

As student in die sewentigerjare het ek by die Universiteit van Noord-Carolina se valskermspringspan aangesluit. Dit was vir my soos ’n geheime broederskap – ’n groep mense wat iets spesiaals gedeel het. My eerste sprong was vreesaanjaend, en die tweede nog meer so. Maar teen die twaalfde sprong, toe ek uit die vliegtuig spring en meer as ’n duisend voet vryval voordat ek my valskerm laat oopgaan (my eerste “tien-sekonde-vertraging”), het ek geweet ek is in my element. Ek het in die loop van my studentejare 365 valskermspronge gemaak en meer as drie en ’n halwe ure in vryval aangeteken, hoofsaaklik in formasies met soveel as vyf-en-twintig medespringers. Hoewel ek in 1976 ophou spring het, het ek dikwels daarna nog helder drome oor valskermspring gehad, wat altyd mooi en aangenaam was.

Die beste spronge was dikwels laatmiddag, wanneer die son agter die kim begin wegsak. Dis moeilik om die gevoel van daardie spronge te beskryf: ’n gevoel van nader aan iets te kom wat ek nooit ’n naam kon gee nie, maar waarvan ek nie genoeg kon kry nie. Dit was nie soseer om alleen te wees nie, want ons het juis nie alleen gespring nie. Daar was vyf, ses, soms tien of twaalf mense wat aan een vryvalformasie deelgeneem het. Hoe meer springers en hoe groter die uitdaging, hoe beter.

Een pragtige herfsdag in 1975 het die UNC-span saam met springers van ’n valskermsentrum in die ooste van Noord-Carolina aan formasies deelgeneem. Met ons voorlaaste sprong, uit ’n D18 Beechcraft teen 10 500 voet, het tien van ons ’n sneeuvlokkie-formasie gemaak. Ons het dit reggekry om die formasie te voltooi voordat ons 7 000 voet verbygesteek het en kon dus ’n volle agtien sekondes in die formasie geniet terwyl ons deur ’n opening tussen twee kolomme stapelwolke val, voordat ons op 3 500 voet die formasie ontbind het en van mekaar wegbeweeg het om ons valskerms te laat oopgaan.

Toe ons die grond tref, was die son al onder. Maar ons het gou in ’n ander vliegtuig ingeklim en vinnig opgestyg om die laaste strale van die son te vang en ’n tweede sonsondergangsprong te maak. Vir hierdie sprong sou twee junior lede hulle eerste kans kry om in formasie in te vlieg – dit wil sê, om van buite af aan te sluit, eerder as om die basis of spil uit te maak, wat makliker is omdat jy bloot reguit ondertoe val terwyl al die ander in jou rigting moet beweeg. Dit was

’n opwindende vooruitsig vir die die twee junior lede, maar ook vir die res van die span, want ons was besig om die span op te bou en vir lede ervaring te gee in al hoe groter formasies.

Ek was die laaste lid om te spring, in ’n sterformasie vir ses, bokant die landingstroke van die klein lughawe net buite Roanoke Rapids, Noord-Carolina. Die ou wat net voor my gespring het, was Chuck. Chuck was redelik ervare in vryvalformasies. Teen 7 500 voet kon ons nog die son sien, maar een en ’n halwe myl onder ons het die straatligte begin flikker. Skemerspronge was altyd iets besonders en hierdie een het beloof om ’n mooie te wees.

Al het ek net ’n sekonde of twee ná Chuck uitgespring, moes ek vinnig beweeg om almal in te haal. Ek moes die eerste sewe sekondes of so kop eerste reg ondertoe pyl. Sodoende sou ek byna 100 myl per uur vinniger as my spanmaats val en kon ek betyds wees om by die formasie aan te sluit.

Normale prosedure vir vryvalformasies is dat die formasie by 3 500 voet ontbind en die springers so ver as moontlik van mekaar moet wegbeweeg. Elkeen waai dan met sy arms, as teken dat sy valskerm binnekort sal oopgaan, kyk om om seker te maak dat niemand bokant hom is nie en trek dan die koord.

“Drie, twee, een … spring!”

Die eerste vier springers was uit, Chuck en ek kort op hulle hakke. Onderstebo in ’n kopduik en in volle vaart naby eindsnelheid, glimlag ek en sien die son die tweede keer daardie dag ondergaan. My plan was om tot by die ander te snel en dan die lugremme te gebruik deur my arms uit te strek (ons het materiaalvlerke van pols tot heup gehad wat geweldige weerstand bied wanneer dit teen volle snelheid oopgestrek word) en my springpak se klokmoue en -broekspype met lug te laat vul.

Maar dinge het anders verloop.

Terwyl ek die formasie nader, sien ek dat een van die nuwe ouens te vinnig inbeweeg. Miskien het die val tussen die wolke deur hom onkant gevang – hom daaraan herinner dat hy teen ongeveer twee honderd voet per sekonde nader aan die reuseplaneet in die halfduister daar onder beweeg. In plaas daarvan om stadig nader aan die rand van die formasie te beweeg, het hy almal uitmekaar gestamp. Nou was die ander lede van die formasie onbeheers aan ’t tuimel.

Hulle was ook veels te naby aan mekaar. ’n Valskermspringer laat ’n turbulente laagdrukstroom agter. As ’n ander springer in daardie stroom beland, versnel hy onmiddellik en kan teen die persoon voor hom bots. Dan sal albei springers verder versnel en kan hulle die persoon voor hulle tref. Anders gestel, dit kan op ’n ramp afstuur.

Ek het my lyf gedraai en in ’n ander rigting beweeg om die tuimelende deurmekaarspul te vermy. Ek het tot bokant “die kol” beweeg, ’n spesifieke punt op die grond waar ons valskerms moes oopgaan en die stadige twee minute lange daling sou begin.

Ek het teruggekyk en met verligting gesien dat die gedisoriënteerde springers nou van mekaar af begin wegbeweeg het en uit die dodelike opeenhoping weggebreek het.

Chuck was tussen hulle. Tot my verbasing het hy op my afgepyl en reg onder my tot stilstand gekom. Met al die getuimel het ons vinniger deur die hoogte van 2 000 voet beweeg as wat Chuck besef het. Miskien het hy gedink die geluk is aan sy kant en hy hoef nie die reëls streng na te kom nie.

Hy sien my seker nie. Die gedagte het skaars posgevat voor Chuck se kleurvolle loodsskerm uit sy rugsak peul, teen 120 mpu wind skep, reg in my rigting skiet en die valskerm in sy sloop agternasleep.

Van die oomblik dat ek Chuck se loodsskerm sien oopvou het, het ek ’n breukdeel van ’n sekonde gehad om te reageer. Dit sou minder as ’n sekonde neem om deur sy valskerm te val en – waarskynlik – teen Chuck self. As ek teen daardie spoed sy arm of been sou tref, sou ek dit morsaf ruk, en in die proses self noodlottig beseer word. As ek hom trompop sou tref, sou ons liggame as ’t ware ontplof.

Mense sê dinge gebeur in sulke situasies stadiger, en dit is waar. My brein het die gebeure in dié paar millisekondes waargeneem asof dit ’n vertraagdeaksierolprent was.

Die oomblik toe ek die loodsskerm sien, ruk ek my arms teen my sye, maak ek reg vir ’n kopduik en buig my heupe effens. Dié vaartbelynde liggaamshouding het my laat versnel, en deur te buig, het ek eers effens en toe skerp horisontaal soos ’n vlerk reg voor Chuck en sy bultende valskerm verbygeskiet.

Ek het teen meer as 150 myl per uur of 220 voet per sekonde by hom verbybeweeg. Teen daardie spoed het hy waarskynlik nie my gesigsuitdrukking gesien nie. Maar as hy het, sou hy die stomme

verbasing op my gesig gesien het. Ek het dit reggekry om binne mikrosekondes op 'n situasie te reageer wat, as ek werklik kans gehad het om daaroor na te dink, veels te kompleks sou wees om te hanteer.

En tog … ek *het* dit hanteer, en ons het albei veilig geland. Dit was asof my brein, gekonfronteer deur 'n situasie wat meer vereis het as waartoe dit normaalweg in staat sou wees, vir 'n oomblik superaangedrewe was.

Hoe het ek dit reggekry? In die loop van my loopbaan van meer as twintig jaar in neurochirurgie – waar ek die brein bestudeer het, die werking daarvan waargeneem het, chirurgie daarop toegepas het – het ek dikwels oor hierdie vraag nagedink. Uiteindelik het ek dit toegeskryf aan die feit dat die brein waarlik 'n buitengewone orgaan is: meer buitengewoon as wat ons selfs kan raai.

Ek besef nou dat die ware antwoord op daardie vraag veel dieper lê. Maar my lewe en wêreldbeskouing moes 'n volkome metamorfose ondergaan om daardie antwoord te kon raaksien. Hierdie boek gaan oor die gebeure wat my siening hieroor laat verander het. Dit het my oortuig dat, hoe wonderlik die werking van die brein ook al is, dit glad nie my brein was wat daardie dag my lewe gered het nie. Dit wat daardie dag tot aksie oorgegaan het toe Chuck se valskerm begin oopgaan het, was 'n ander, veel dieper deel van my. 'n Deel wat so vinnig kon beweeg omdat dit nie tydgebonde is, soos die brein en die liggaam nie.

Dit was inderwaarheid dieselfde deel wat my as kind so na die hemel laat verlang het. Dit is nie net die slimste deel van die mens nie, maar ook die diepste, en tog, vir die grootste deel van my volwasse lewe kon ek nie daarin glo nie.

Maar ek glo nou, en die bladsye wat hierop volg sal dit verklaar.

Ek is 'n neurochirurg.

Ek het in 1976 by Chapel Hill aan die Universiteit van Noord-Carolina gegradueer, met chemie as hoofvak, en in 1980 by Duke-Universiteit se mediese fakulteit as mediese dokter gekwalifiseer. Gedurende die elf jaar wat ek by Duke asook Massachusetts General Hospital en Harvard as mediese student en huisdokter deurgebring het, het ek my op neuroëndokrinologie toegespits, die studie van die interaksie tussen die senustelsel en die endokriene stelsel – die kliere wat die hormone vrystel wat die meeste van die liggaam se aktiwiteite

reguleer. Ek het ook gedurende twee van die elf jaar ondersoek ingestel na die wyse waarop bloedvate in een area van die brein patologies reageer wanneer daar bloeding uit ’n aneurisme plaasvind – ’n toestand bekend as serebrale vasospasma.

Nadat ek ’n beursstudie in serebrovaskulêre chirurgie in Newcastle upon Tyne in die Verenigde Koninkryk voltooi het, het ek vyftien jaar as medeprofessor in chirurgie by Harvard se mediese fakulteit deurgebrin, en in neurochirurgie gespesialiseer. In dié tyd het ek talle operasies uitgevoer, waarvan baie op pasiënte met ernstige, lewensbedreigende breintoestande was.

Die meeste van my navorsing het die ontwikkeling van gevorderde tegniese prosedures behels soos stereotaktiese radiochirurgie, ’n tegniek wat chirurge in staat stel om radioaktiewe strale op spesifieke teikens diep in die brein te rig sonder om naasliggende areas te affekteer. Ek het ook gehelp om neurochirurgiese prosedures met behulp van magnetieseresonansiebeelding (MRB) te ontwikkel, wat deurslaggewend is vir die herstel van moeilik behandelbare breintoestande soos tumore en vaskulêre versteurings.

Gedurende hierdie tyd was ek skrywer en medeskrywer van meer as 150 hoofstukke en artikels vir mediese tydskrifte wat aan eweknie-beoordeling onderwerp is en het my bevindings by meer as twee honderd mediese kongresse dwarsoor die wêreld voorgelê.

Met ander woorde, ek het my lewe aan die wetenskap gewy. Om die hulpmiddels van die moderne medisyne te gebruik om mense te help gesond maak en om meer oor die funksionering van die liggaam en die brein te leer was my lewensroeping. Ek het my geweldig gelukkig geag dat ek hierdie roeping gevind het. Nog belangriker was my beeldskone vrou en twee pragtige kinders. Hoewel ek verknog was aan my werk, het ek nie my gesin afgeskeep nie, wat ek as die ander groot seëning in my lewe beskou het. In vele opsigte was ek ’n uiters bevoorregte man, en ek het dit goed besef.

Op 10 November 2008, op die ouderdom van vier-en-vyftig, het my lewe egter ’n minder gelukkige wending geneem. Ek het ’n uiters seldsame siekte opgedoen en was sewe dae lank in ’n koma. Gedurende daardie tyd het my neokorteks – die buitenste oppervlak van die brein, die deel wat ons identiteit as mens bepaal – tot stilstand gekom. Buite werking. Afwesig.

Wanneer jou brein afwesig is, is jy ook afwesig. As neurochirurg het ek deur die jare verskeie verhale gehoor van mense wat vreemde ervarings gehad het, gewoonlik nadat hulle ’n hartstilstand gehad het: verhale van reise na geheimsinnige, wonderskone landskappe; van gesprekke met gestorwe geliefdes – selfs van ontmoetings met die Opperwese.

Sonder twyfel wonderlike ervarings. Maar, volgens my was dit alles suiwer verbeelding. Wat veroorsaak die boaardse ervarings waarvan hierdie mense getuig? Ek het nie voorgegee dat ek die antwoord weet nie, maar ek het wel geweet dit is in die brein geleë. Alle bewussyn is. As jy nie ’n funksionerende brein het nie, is jy nie by jou bewussyn nie.

Die rede daarvoor is dat die brein die masjien is wat bewussyn produseer. Wanneer die masjien gaan staan, is daar geen bewussyn nie. Al is die werking van die brein ook hoe ingewikkeld en geheimsinnig, in wese is die saak heel eenvoudig. Trek die kragprop uit en die TV is dood. Die vertoning is verby, al was dit hoe vermaaklik.

Dit is wat ek geglo het voordat my eie brein gaan staan het.

Dit was nie asof my brein gedurende my koma nie reg gewerk het nie – dit het *glad nie* gewerk nie. Ek meen dat dit moontlik die rede was vir die diepte en intensiteit van die nabydood-ervaring (NDE) wat ek self ondergaan het. Baie NDE’s wat aangemeld word, vind plaas wanneer ’n persoon se hart ’n rukkie lank gaan staan. In so ’n geval is die neokorteks tydelik onaktief, maar gewoonlik nie erg beskadig nie, mits die vloei van suurstofryke bloed binne ongeveer vier minute hervat, danksy kardiopulmonêre resussitasie of die herstel van hartfunksie. In my geval was die neokorteks egter glad nie in tel nie. Ek het te staan gekom voor die bestaan van ’n bewussynswêreld *geheel en al vry van die beperkings van my fisiese brein*.

In ’n sekere sin was my ervaring ’n uiterste voorbeeld van ’n nabydoodervaring. As praktiserende neurochirurg met baie jare se navorsing en praktiese ervaring in die operasiesaal was ek in ’n besondere posisie, nie net om die werklikheid van wat met my gebeur het te beoordeel nie, maar ook die *implikasies* daarvan.

Die implikasies is meer verreikend as wat ’n mens kan besef. My ervaring het vir my getoon dat die dood van die liggaam en die brein

nie die einde van bewussyn is nie, dat menslike ervaring ná die dood voortgaan. En wat meer is, dit gaan voort onder die sorg van ’n God wat elkeen van ons liefhet en vir ons omgee, en waak oor die heelal en alle wesens wat daarin is.

Die plek waar ek was, bestaan werklik. Werklik in ’n sin wat ons lewe hier en nou soos ’n droom laat lyk teenoor daardie werklikheid. Dit beteken egter nie dat ek my lewe nou minder ag nie. Om die waarheid te sê, ek waardeer die lewe meer as ooit tevore. Dit is omdat ek die lewe nou binne sy ware konteks sien.

Hierdie lewe is nie betekenisloos nie. Maar ons kan daardie feit nie van hier af raaksien nie – altans, die meeste van die tyd nie. Wat met my tydens daardie koma gebeur het, is sonder twyfel die belangrikste verhaal wat ek ooit sal vertel. Maar dis ’n moeilike verhaal om te vertel, omdat dit so vreemd is aan ons gewone begrip van die werklikheid. Ek kan dit nie bloot van die dakke af uitroep nie. Terselfdertyd is my gevolgtrekkings op ’n mediese ontleding van my ervaring gebaseer, en op my kennis van die mees gevorderde begrippe in breinwetenskap en bewussynstudies. Toe ek eers die waarheid agter my reis besef, moes ek dit vertel. Om dit behoorlik te doen, is nou die hooftaak van my lewe.

Dit beteken nie dat ek my mediese werk en my lewe as neurochirurg agtergelaat het nie. Maar noudat ek die voorreg gehad het om te verstaan dat ons lewe nie ophou wanneer ons liggaam en brein sterf nie, beskou ek dit as my plig, my roeping om die verhaal te vertel vir mense wat moontlik al soortgelyke verhale gehoor het en dit wou glo, maar dit nog nie ten volle kon doen nie.

Dit is aan hierdie mense, meer as enige ander, wat ek hierdie boek rig, en die boodskap wat daarin vervat is. Wat ek vir jou wil vertel, is net so belangrik soos enigiets wat enigiemand ooit vir jou sal vertel, én dit is waar.

1.

The Pain

Lynchburg, Virginia—November 10, 2008

My eyes popped open. In the darkness of our bedroom, I focused on the red glow of the bedside clock: 4:30 A.M.—an hour before I'd usually wake up for the seventy-minute drive from our house in Lynchburg, Virginia, to the Focused Ultrasound Surgery Foundation in Charlottesville where I worked. My wife, Holley, was still sleeping soundly beside me.

After spending almost twenty years in academic neurosurgery in the greater Boston area, I'd moved with Holley and the rest of our family to the highlands of Virginia two years earlier, in 2006. Holley and I met in October 1977, two years after both of us had left college. Holley was working toward her masters in fine arts, and I was in medical school. She'd been on a couple of dates with my college roommate, Vic. One day, he brought her by to meet me—probably to show her off. As they were leaving, I told Holley to come back anytime, adding that she shouldn't feel obliged to bring Vic.

On our first true date, we drove to a party in Charlotte, North Carolina, two and a half hours each way by car. Holley had laryngitis so I had to do 99 percent of the talking both ways. It was easy. We were married in June 1980 at St Thomas's Episcopal Church in Windsor, North Carolina, and soon after moved into the Royal Oaks apartments in Durham, where I was a resident in surgery at Duke. Our place was far from royal, and I don't recall spotting any oaks there, either. We had very little money but we were both so busy—and so happy to be together—that we didn't care. One of our first vacations was a springtime camping tour of North Carolina's beaches. Spring is no-see-um (the biting midge) bug season in the Carolinas, and our tent didn't offer much protection from them. We had plenty of fun just the same. Swimming in the surf one afternoon at Ocracoke, I devised a way to catch the blue-shell crabs that were scuttling about at my feet. We took a big batch over to the Pony Island Motel, where some friends were staying, and cooked them up on a grill. There was plenty

to share with everyone. Despite all our cutting corners, it wasn't long till we found ourselves distressingly low on cash. We were staying with our best friends Bill and Patty Wilson, and, on a whim, decided to accompany them to a night of bingo. Bill had been going every Thursday of every summer for ten years and he had never won. It was Holley's first time playing bingo. Call it beginner's luck, or divine intervention, but she won two hundred dollars—which felt like five thousand dollars to us. The cash extended our trip and made it much more relaxed.

I earned my M.D. in 1980, just as Holley earned her degree and began a career as an artist and teacher. I performed my first solo brain surgery at Duke in 1981. Our firstborn, Eben IV, was born in 1987 at the Princess Mary Maternity Hospital in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in northern England during my cerebrovascular fellowship, and our younger son, Bond, was born at the Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston in 1998.

I loved my fifteen years working at Harvard Medical School and Brigham & Women's Hospital. Our family treasured those years in the Greater Boston area. But, in 2005 Holley and I agreed it was time to move back to the South. We wanted to be closer to our families, and I saw it as an opportunity to have a bit more autonomy than I'd had at Harvard. So in the spring of 2006, we started anew in Lynchburg, in the highlands of Virginia. It didn't take long for us to settle back into the more relaxed life we'd both enjoyed growing up in the South.

For a moment I just lay there, vaguely trying to zero in on what had awakened me. The previous day—a Sunday—had been sunny, clear, and just a little crisp—classic late autumn Virginia weather. Holley, Bond (ten years old at the time), and I had gone to a barbecue at the home of a neighbor. In the evening we had spoken by phone to our son Eben IV (then twenty), who was a junior at the University of Delaware. The only hitch in the day had been the mild respiratory virus that Holley, Bond, and I were all still dragging around from the previous week. My back had started aching just before bedtime, so I'd taken a quick bath, which seemed to drive the pain into submission. I wondered if I had awakened so early this morning because the virus was still lurking in my body.

I shifted slightly in bed and a wave of pain shot down my spine—far more intense than the night before. Clearly the flu virus was still

hanging on, and then some. The more I awoke, the worse the pain became. Since I wasn't able to fall back to sleep and had an hour to spend before my workday started, I decided on another warm bath. I sat up in bed, swung my feet to the floor, and stood up.

Instantly the pain ratcheted up another notch—a dull, punishing throb penetrating deeply at the base of my spine. Leaving Holley asleep, I padded gingerly down the hall to the main upstairs bathroom.

I ran some water and eased myself into the tub, pretty certain that the warmth would instantly do some good. Wrong. By the time the tub was half full, I knew that I'd made a mistake. Not only was the pain getting worse, but it was also so intense now that I feared I might have to shout for Holley to help me get out of the tub.

Thinking how ridiculous the situation had become, I reached up and grabbed a towel hanging from a rack directly above me. I edged the towel over to the side of the rack so that the rack would be less likely to break loose from the wall and gently pulled myself up.

Another jolt of pain shot down my back, so intense that I gasped. This was definitely *not* the flu. But what else could it be? After struggling out of the slippery tub and into my scarlet terry-cloth bathrobe, I slowly made my way back to our bedroom and flopped down on our bed. My body was already damp again from cold sweat.

Holley stirred and turned over.

"What's going on? What time is it?"

"I don't know," I said. "My back. I am in serious pain."

Holley began rubbing my back. To my surprise it made me feel a little better. Doctors, by and large, don't take kindly to being sick. I'm no exception. For a moment I was convinced the pain—and whatever was causing it—would finally start to recede. But by 6:30 A.M., the time I usually left for work, I was still in agony and virtually paralyzed.

Bond came into our bedroom at 7:30, curious as to why I was still at home.

"What's going on?"

"Your father doesn't feel well, honey," Holley said.

I was still lying on the bed with my head propped up on a pillow. Bond came over, reached out, and began to massage my temples gently.

His touch sent what felt like a lightning bolt through my head—the worst pain yet. I screamed. Surprised by my reaction, Bond jumped

back.

"It's okay," Holley said to Bond, clearly thinking otherwise. "It's nothing you did. Dad has a horrible headache." Then I heard her say, more to herself than to me: "I wonder if I should call an ambulance."

If there's one thing doctors hate even more than being sick, it's being in the emergency room as a patient. I pictured the house filling up with EMTs, the retinue of stock questions, the ride to the hospital, the paperwork . . . I thought at some point I would begin to feel better and regret calling an ambulance in the first place.

"No, it's okay," I said. "It's bad now but it's bound to get better soon. You should probably help Bond get ready for school."

"Eben, I really think—"

"I'll be fine," I interrupted, my face still buried in the pillow. I was still paralyzed by the pain. "Seriously, do *not* call nine-one-one. I'm not that sick. It's just a muscle spasm in my lower back, and a headache."

Reluctantly, Holley took Bond downstairs and fed him some breakfast before sending him up the street to a friend's house to catch a ride to school. As Bond was going out the front door, the thought occurred to me that if this was something serious and I *did* end up in the hospital, I might not see him after school that afternoon. I mustered all my energy and croaked out, "Have a good day at school, Bond."

By the time Holley came back upstairs to check on me, I was slipping into unconsciousness. Thinking I was napping, she left me to rest and went downstairs to call some of my colleagues, hoping to get their opinions on what might be happening.

Two hours later, feeling she'd let me rest long enough, she came back to check on me. Pushing open our bedroom door, she saw me lying in bed just as before. But looking closer, she saw that my body wasn't relaxed as it had been, but rigid as a board. She turned on the light and saw that I was jerking violently. My lower jaw was jutting forward unnaturally, and my eyes were open and rolling back in my head.

"Eben, say something!" Holley screamed. When I didn't respond, she called nine-one-one. It took the EMTs less than ten minutes to arrive, and they quickly loaded me into an ambulance bound for the Lynchburg General Hospital emergency room.

Had I been conscious, I could have told Holley exactly what I was undergoing there on the bed during those terrifying moments she

spent waiting for the ambulance: a full *grand mal* seizure, brought on, no doubt, by some kind of extremely severe shock to my brain.

But of course, I was not able to do that.

For the next seven days, I would be present to Holley and the rest of my family in body alone. I remember nothing of this world during that week and have had to glean from others those parts of this story that occurred during the time I was unconscious. My mind, my spirit—whatever you may choose to call the central, human part of me—was gone.

1.

Die Pyn

Lynchburg, Virginië – 10 November 2008

My oë gaan oop. In ons donker slaapkamer fokus ek op die rooi gloed van die wekker op die bedkassie: 4:30 FM – 'n uur voordat ek gewoonlik opstaan vir die sewentig minute lange rit van ons huis in Lynchburg, Virginië, tot in Charlottesville waar ek by die Focused Ultrasound Surgery Foundation ('n stigting vir gefokusde ultraklank-chirurgie) werk. Holley, my vrou, slaap nog rustig langs my.

Nadat ek byna twintig jaar in die Boston-omgewing by akademiese chirurgie betrokke was, het ons gesin twee jaar vantevore, in 2006, na die hooglande van Virginië verhuis. Ek en Holley het in Oktober 1977 ontmoet, twee jaar nadat ons albei ons voorgraadse studies voltooi het. Holley was besig met haar meestersgraad in skone kunste en ek was besig met mediese studies. Sy het 'n paar keer met Vic, my kamermaat op universiteit, uitgegaan. Hy het haar eendag aan my kom voorstel – waarskynlik om 'n bietjie te spog. Toe ek hulle groet, het ek vir Holley gesê sy kan gerus weer kom kuier, maar sy hoef nie vir Vic saam te bring nie.

Op ons eerste regte afspraak het ons na 'n partytjie toe gegaan in Charlotte, Noord-Carolina, 'n rit van twee en 'n halwe uur soontoe en weer terug. Holley het laringitis gehad, dus het ek 99 persent van die praatwerk gedoen. Dit was maklik. Ons is in Junie 1980 in St Thomas se Episkopale Kerk in Windsor, Noord-Carolina, getroud en het kort daarna in Royal Oaks-woonstelle in Durham gaan woon, waar ek 'n kliniese assistent in chirurgie by Duke-Universiteit was. Die woonstel was allesbehalwe koninklik, en ek kan nie onthou dat ek enige eikebome daar gesien het nie. Die geldjies was maar min, maar ons was so besig – en so gelukkig bymekaar – dat ons nie omgegee het nie. Een van ons eerste vakansies was 'n toer na die strande van Noord-Carolina gedurende die lente. Lente is brandassie-seisoen in die Carolinas, en ons tent het nie veel beskerming teen die bytende

muggies gebied nie. Maar dit het nie ons pret bederf nie. Terwyl ons een middag by Ocracoke in die branders baljaar het, het ek ’n manier gevind om die bloudop-krappe te vang wat by my voete rondskarrel. Ons het ’n groot vangs saamgeneem Pony Island Motel toe, waar vriende van ons tuisgegaan het, en dit op die rooster gebraai. Daar was genoeg vir almal. Ondanks al ons besparingspogings het ons geld egter begin opraak. Ons het by ons vriende Bill en Patty Wilson gekuier en, op die ingewing van die oomblik, besluit om saam met hulle te gaan bingo speel. Bill het die voorafgaande tien jaar gereeld elke Donderdagaand van elke somervakansie gaan speel, en nooit iets gewen nie. Dit was Holley se eerste probeerslag. Dit kan blote geluk wees, of hulp van bo, maar sy het tweehonderd dollar gewen – dit het vir ons soos vyfduisend dollar gevoel. Danksy dié meevaller kon ons ontspan en langer vakansie hou.

Ek het my MD in 1980 behaal en Holley het haar graad voltooi en as kunstenaar en onderwyser begin werk. Ek het my eerste solo-breinoperasie in 1981 by Duke uitgevoer. In 1987 is ons oudste seun, Eben IV, by die Princess Mary Maternity Hospital gebore, tydens my beursstudie in serebrovaskulêre chirurgie in Newcastle upon tyne in die noorde van Engeland. Ons jongste seun, Bond, is in 1980 by die Brigham & Women’s Hospital in Boston gebore.

Die vyftien jaar wat ek aan Harvard se mediese fakulteit en Brigham & Women’s Hospital verbonde was, het vir my baie beteken. Ons gesin was gelukkig in die Boston-omgewing. Maar in 2005 het ek en Holley besluit dis tyd om terug te gaan na die suide. Ons wou nader aan ons familie wees en vir my was dit ’n geleentheid om meer onafhanklik te wees in my werk. In die lente van 2006 het ons na Lynchburg in die hooglande van Virginië verhuis. Ons het sommer gou weer gewoond geraak aan die rustiger lewe in die suide waarmee ons grootgeword het.

’n Oomblik lank lê ek net daar, en probeer agterkom wat my wakker gemaak het. Die vorige dag – ’n Sondag – was sonnig en helder en net effens koel, tipiese laatherfs-weer in Virginië. Holley, Bond (destyds tien jaar oud) en ek was die vorige dag by ’n vleisbraaiery by bure. Later die aand het ons oor die telefoon gesels met Eben IV (destyds twintig), wat ’n voorgraadse student aan die Universiteit van Delaware was. Die enigste haakplek in die dag was die ligte griep wat ek, Holley

en Bond nog van die vorige week oorgehou het. My rug het voor slaaptyd begin seer word, toe het ek ’n vinnige bad geneem, wat die pyn laat bedaar het. Ek lê nou en wonder of dit nog die nagevolge van die virus is wat my so vroeg laat wakker word het.

Ek skuif effens in die bed en ’n pyngolf skiet in my ruggraat af – veel erger as die vorige aand. Dis duidelik dat hierdie griepvirus my nie laat los nie. Hoe wakkerder ek word, hoe erger raak die pyn. Ek kry dit nie reg om weer aan die slaap te raak nie en dit is nog ’n uur voor ek moet regmaak om werk toe te gaan. Ek besluit op nog ’n warm bad. Ek sit regop, plaas my voete op die vloer en staan regop.

Ek voel onmiddellik hoe die pyn ’n paar grade styg – ’n dowwe, deurdringende, polsende pyn aan die onderpunt van my ruggraat. Sonder om vir Holley wakker te maak, loop ek voetjie vir voetjie in die gang af na die hoofbadkamer.

Ek laat die water inloop en klim solank versigtig in, oortuig dat die hitte onmiddellik verligting sal bring. Verkeerd. Teen die tyd dat die bad halfvol is, weet ek dat ek ’n fout gemaak het. Die pyn raak nie net erger nie, maar dit is nou so intens dat ek bevrees is ek sal vir Holley moet roep om my uit die bad te help.

Ek gryp ’n handdoek vas wat aan die reling bokant die bad hang en trek die handdoek na die een kant toe, sodat die reling nie sommer sal losruk nie en trek my versigtig daaraan op. Ek kan nie help om te dink hoe belaglik die situasie geword het nie.

Nog ’n skietpyn in my rug af laat my na my asem snak. Dit is beslis *nie* griep nie. Maar wat is dit dan? Met ’n gesukkel kom ek uit die bad en trek my rooi handdoekstof-kamerjas aan. Ek skuifel terug na ons slaapkamer en sak op die bed neer.

Holley roer en draai om.

“Wat’s fout? Hoe laat is dit?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê ek. “My rug. Dis verskriklik seer.”

Holley begin my rug vryf. Tot my verbasing help dit ’n bietjie. Die meeste dokters hou glad nie daarvan om siek te wees nie. Ek is geen uitsondering nie. ’n Oomblik lank glo ek die pyn – en wat dit ook al veroorsaak – sal nou uiteindelik begin oorgaan. Maar teen 6:30 vm, die tyd wat ek gewoonlik werk toe gaan, verkeer ek nog in geweldige pyn en is so te sê verlam.

Bond kom 7:30 vm na ons slaapkamer toe, nuuskierig om te weet

waarom ek nog by die huis is.

“Wat is aan die gang?”

“Pappa voel nie lekker nie, my skat,” sê Holley.

Ek lê nog in die bed, met my kop regop teen ’n kussing. Bond kom nader en begin saggies my slape vryf.

Toe hy aan my raak, voel dit soos ’n weerligstraal wat deur my kop skiet – die kwaaiste pyn nóg. Ek gil en Bond spring terug, geskok deur my reaksie.

“Toe maar, dis nie jou skuld nie,” sê Holley om Bond gerus te stel, “Pappa het ’n vreeslike hoofpyn.” Sy dink hardop: “Ek wonder of ek ’n ambulans moet laat kom?”

As daar een ding is wat dokters nog minder van hou as om siek te wees, dan is dit om ’n pasiënt in die noodeenheid te wees. Ek sien al in my geestesoog die paramedici die hele huis vol, die gewone vrae, die rit na die hospitaal, die vorms wat ingevul moet word … Ek is seker ek sal binnekort begin beter voel en dan spyt wees dat ons die ambulans laat kom het.

“Nee, toe maar,” sê ek. “Dis nou erg, maar dit moet een of ander tyd beter word. Help jy liewer vir Bond om reg te maak vir skool.”

“Eben, ek dink regtig –”

“Dis nie nodig nie,” val ek haar in die rede, met my gesig nog in die kussing gedruk. “Regtig, moenie die nooddiens bel nie. Ek is nie so siek nie. Dis net ’n spierspasma in my rug, en hoofpyn.”

Teësinnig gaan Holley en Bond kombuis toe sodat Bond kan ontbyt eet voor hy skool toe gaan. Net voor hy uit is by die deur, kom die gedagte by my op dat as dit iets ernstigs is en ek tog moet hospitaal toe gaan, ek hom dalk nie daardie middag ná skool sal sien nie. Ek span al my kragte in en roep agterna met ’n bewerige stem: “Lekker dag, Bond!”

Teen die tyd dat Holley weer kom kyk hoe dit met my gaan, het ek al my bewussyn begin verloor. Onder die indruk dat ek ingesluimer het, laat sy my met rus en gaan af ondertoe om van my kollegas te bel en hulle raad te vra.

Twee uur later reken sy dat ek lank genoeg gerus het, en kom weer inloer. Sy sien ek lê nog soos voorheen. Maar toe sy nader kom, sien sy my liggaam is nie ontspanne nie, maar stokstyf. Sy skakel die lig aan en sien dat my lyf hewig ruk. My onderkaak is op ’n onnatuurlike

manier vorentoe gedruk, en my oë is oop en in die kasse teruggerol.

“Eben, praat met my!” gil Holley. Sy kry geen reaksie nie en bel dadelik die noodnommer. Die paramedici is binne minder as tien minute daar en hulle laai my onmiddellik in die ambulans, om my na Lynchburg General Hospital se noodeenheid te neem.

As ek by my bewussyn was, sou ek vir Holley kon sê presies wat met my aan die gang was terwyl sy vir die ambulans gewag het: ’n *grand mal*-aanval wat deur een of ander uiters ernstige aantasting van my brein meegebring is.

Maar natuurlik kon ek dit nie doen nie.

Die volgende sewe dae sou ek net in liggaam vir Holley en die res van my familie teenwoordig wees. Ek onthou niks van hierdie wêreld gedurende daardie week nie en moes sedertdien by ander vasstel wat alles gebeur het in die tyd dat ek bewusteloos was. My psige, my gees – wat mens ook al die kerndeel van die mens noem – was weg.

2.

The Hospital

The Lynchburg General Hospital emergency room is the second-busiest ER in the state of Virginia and is typically in full swing by 9:30 on a weekday morning. That Monday was no exception. Though I spent most of my workdays in Charlottesville, I'd logged plenty of operating time at Lynchburg General, and I knew just about everyone there.

Laura Potter, an ER physician I'd known and worked with closely for almost two years, received the call from the ambulance that a fifty-four-year-old Caucasian male, in *status epilepticus,* was about to arrive in her ER. As she headed down to the ambulance entrance, she ran over the list of possible causes for the incoming patient's condition. It was the same list that I'd have come up with if I had been in her shoes: alcohol withdrawal; drug overdose; hyponatremia (abnormally low sodium level in the blood); stroke; metastatic or primary brain tumor; intraparenchymal hemorrhage (bleeding into the substance of the brain); brain abscess . . . and meningitis.

When the EMTs wheeled me into Major Bay 1 of the ER, I was still convulsing violently, while intermittently groaning and flailing my arms and legs.

It was obvious to Dr. Potter from the way I was raving and writhing around that my brain was under heavy attack. A nurse brought over a crash cart, another drew blood, and a third replaced the first, now empty, intravenous bag that the EMTs had set up at our house before loading me into the ambulance. As they went to work on me, I was squirming like a six-foot fish pulled out of the water. I spouted bursts of garbled, nonsensical sounds and animal-like cries. Just as troubling to Laura as the seizures was that I seemed to show an asymmetry in the motor control of my body. That could mean that not only was my brain under attack but that serious and possibly irreversible brain damage was already under way.

The sight of any patient in such a state takes getting used to, but Laura had seen it all in her many years in the ER. She had never seen one of her fellow physicians delivered into the ER in this condition, however, and looking closer at the contorted, shouting patient on the

gurney, she said, almost to herself, “Eben.”

Then, more loudly, alerting the other doctors and nurses in the area: “This is Eben Alexander.”

Nearby staff who heard her gathered around my stretcher. Holley, who’d been following the ambulance, joined the crowd while Laura reeled off the obligatory questions about the most obvious possible causes for someone in my condition. Was I withdrawing from alcohol? Had I recently ingested any strong hallucinogenic street drugs? Then she went to work trying to bring my seizures to a halt.

In recent months, Eben IV had been putting me through a vigorous conditioning program for a planned father-son climb up Ecuador’s 19,300-foot Mount Cotopaxi, which he had climbed the previous February. The program had increased my strength considerably, making it that much more difficult for the orderlies trying to hold me down. Five minutes and 15 milligrams of intravenous diazepam later, I was still delirious and still trying to fight everyone off, but to Dr. Potter’s relief I was at least now fighting with both sides of my body. Holley told Laura about the severe headache I’d been having before I went into seizure, which prompted Dr. Potter to perform a lumbar puncture—a procedure in which a small amount of cerebrospinal fluid is extracted from the base of the spine.

Cerebrospinal fluid is a clear, watery substance that runs along the surface of the spinal cord and coats the brain, cushioning it from impacts. A normal, healthy human body produces about a pint of it a day, and any diminishment in the clarity of the fluid indicates that an infection or hemorrhage has occurred.

Such an infection is called meningitis: the swelling of the meninges, the membranes that line the inside of the spine and skull and that are in direct contact with the cerebrospinal fluid. In four cases out of five a virus causes the disease. Viral meningitis can make a patient quite ill, but it is only fatal in approximately 1 percent of cases. In one case out of five, however, bacteria cause meningitis. Bacteria, being more primitive than viruses, can be a more dangerous foe. Cases of bacterial meningitis are uniformly fatal if untreated. Even when treated rapidly with the appropriate antibiotics, the mortality rate ranges from 15 to 40 percent.

One of the least likely culprits for bacterial meningitis in adults is a very old and very tough bacteria named *Escherichia coli*—better known simply as *E. coli*. No one knows how old *E. coli* is precisely, but estimates hover between three and four billion years. The organism

has no nucleus and reproduces by the primitive but extremely efficient process known as asexual binary fission (in other words, by splitting in two). Imagine a cell filled, essentially, with DNA, that can take in nutrients (usually from other cells that it attacks and absorbs) directly through its cellular wall. Then imagine that it can simultaneously copy several strands of DNA and split into two daughter cells every twenty minutes or so. In an hour, you'll have 8 of them. In twelve hours, 69 billion. By hour fifteen, you'll have 35 trillion. This explosive growth only slows when its food begins to run out.

E. coli are also highly promiscuous. They can trade genes with other bacterial species through a process called bacterial conjugation, which allows an *E. coli* cell to rapidly pick up new traits (such as resistance to a new antibiotic) when needed. This basic recipe for success has kept *E. coli* on the planet since the earliest days of unicellular life. We all have *E. coli* bacteria residing within us—mostly in our gastrointestinal tract. Under normal conditions, this poses no threat to us. But when varieties of *E. coli* that have picked up DNA strands that make them especially aggressive invade the cerebrospinal fluid around the spinal cord and brain, the primitive cells immediately begin devouring the glucose in the fluid, and whatever else is available to consume, including the brain itself.

No one in the ER, at that point, thought I had *E. coli* meningitis. They had no reason to suspect it. The disease is astronomically rare in adults. Newborns are the most common victims, but cases of babies any older than three months having it are exceedingly uncommon. Fewer than one in 10 million adults contract it spontaneously each year.

In cases of bacterial meningitis, the bacteria attack the outer layer of the brain, or cortex, first. The word *cortex* derives from a Latin word meaning "rind" or "bark." If you picture an orange, its rind is a pretty good model for the way the cortex surrounds the more primitive sections of the brain. The cortex is responsible for memory, language, emotion, visual and auditory awareness, and logic. So when an organism like *E. coli* attacks the brain, the initial damage is to the areas that perform the functions most crucial to maintaining our human qualities. Many victims of bacterial meningitis die in the first several days of their illness. Of those who arrive in an emergency room with a rapid downward spiral in neurologic function, as I did, only 10 percent are lucky enough to survive. However, their luck is limited, as many of them will spend the rest of their lives in a

vegetative state.

Though she didn't suspect *E. coli* meningitis, Dr. Potter thought I might have *some* kind of brain infection, which is why she decided on the lumbar puncture. Just as she was telling one of the nurses to bring her a lumbar puncture tray and prepare me for the procedure, my body surged up as if my gurney had been electrified. With a fresh blast of energy, I let out a long, agonized groan, arched my back, and flailed my arms at the air. My face was red, and the veins in my neck bulged out crazily. Laura shouted for more help, and soon two, then four, and finally six attendants were struggling to hold me down for the procedure. They forced my body into a fetal position while Laura administered more sedatives. Finally, they were able to make me still enough for the needle to penetrate the base of my spine.

When bacteria attack, the body goes immediately into defense mode, sending shock troops of white blood cells from their barracks in the spleen and bone marrow to fight off the invaders. They're the first casualties in the massive cellular war that happens whenever a foreign biological agent invades the body, and Dr. Potter knew that any lack of clarity in my cerebrospinal fluid would be caused by my white blood cells.

Dr. Potter bent over and focused on the manometer, the transparent vertical tube into which the cerebrospinal fluid would emerge. Laura's first surprise was that the fluid didn't drip but gushed out—due to dangerously high pressure.

Her second surprise was the fluid's appearance. The slightest opacity would tell her I was in deep trouble. What shot out into the manometer was viscous and white, with a subtle tinge of green.

My spinal fluid was full of pus.

2.

Die Hospitaal

Die noodeenheid by Lynchburg General Hospital is op een na die besigste noodeenheid in Virginië. Teen 9:30 op ’n weeksoggend is dit gewoonlik al goed besig en daardie Maandag was geen uitsondering nie. Hoewel ek meesal in Charlottesville gewerk het, het ek heelwat operasie-ure in Lynchburg aangeteken, en het omtrent die hele personeel geken.

Laura Potter, ’n nooddiensspesialis wat ek reeds twee jaar geken het en al dikwels mee saamgewerk het, ontvang ’n oproep vanaf die ambulans dat ’n vier-en-vyftigjarige Kaukasiese man, in *status epilepticus*, binnekort by die noodeenheid sal arriveer. Sy haas haar na die ambulans-ingang en dink solank aan al die moontlike oorsake vir die inkomende pasiënt se toestand. Dit is dieselfde lys waaraan ek sou dink as ek in haar skoene was: alkohol-onttrekking; dwelmoordosis; hiponatremie (abnormaal lae natriumvlak in die bloed); beroerte; metastatiese of primêre breingewas; intraparenchimale bloeding (bloeding in die breinweefsel); breinabses … en meningitis.

Toe die paramedici my in die hoofsaal van die noodeenheid instoot, kry ek nog hewige stuiptrekkings, en met tussenposes kreun ek en swaai my arms en bene wild rond.

Die manier waarop ek kreun en steun en rondrol toon duidelik aan dr Potter dat my brein ’n hewige toeval ondergaan. ’n Verpleegster bring ’n noodtrollie nader, ’n ander een trek bloed en nog een vervang die leë sakkie met binneaarse vog vir die drup wat die paramedici by die huis ingeplaas het. Terwyl hulle werk, wriemel ek soos ’n reusevis uit die water. Ek uiter deurmekaar, onsinnige klanke en dieregeluide. Ewe kommerwekkend as die stuiptrekkings is die tekens van asimmetrie in die motoriese beheer van my liggaam. Dit kan beteken dat my brein nie net onder stres verkeer nie, maar dat daar moontlik reeds onherstelbare breinskade ontstaan het.

Om ’n pasiënt in hierdie toestand te sien, kan nogal onthutsend

wees, maar Laura het gedurende haar jare in die noodeenheid al alles gesien. Sy het egter nog nooit een van haar kollegas in hierdie omstandighede in die noodeenheid teëgekom nie. Sy kyk weer na die verwronge liggaam van die ylende pasiënt op die trollie en sê hardop: “Eben.”

Dan, harder, om die ander dokters en verpleegsters se aandag te trek: “Dit is Eben Alexander.”

Personeel in die nabyheid staan nader. Holley, wat agter die ambulans aangery het, sluit nou by hulle aan, terwyl Laura die verpligte vrae aflees om die voor die hand liggende oorsake vir my toestand uit te skakel. Het ek alkoholonttrekking? Het ek onlangs enige sterk dwelms ingeneem? Toe spring sy aan die werk om die stuiptrekkings te probeer bedwing.

In die voorafgaande maande het Eben IV my ’n intensiewe voorbereidingsprogram laat volg vir ons voorgenome pa-en-seun-klimtog teen die berg Cotopaxi in Ecuador, wat hy die vorige Februarie uitgeklim het. Die oefenprogram het my aansienlik sterker gemaak, en moeiliker vir die hospitaalordonnanse om my vas te druk. Selfs ná vyf minute en 15 milligram intraveneuse diasepam is ek nog steeds ylhoofdig en veg verbete teen my versorgers, maar tot dr Potter se verligting veg ek nou met albei kante van my liggaam. Holley lig Laura in oor die erge hoofpyn wat ek gehad het voordat die aanval begin het, wat haar laat besluit om ’n lumbale punksie uit te voer – ’n prosedure waar ’n klein hoeveelheid serebrospinale vog uit die rugmurg getrek word.

Serebrospinale vog is ’n helder waterige vloeistof wat die rugmurg en die brein omring en teen skokke beskerm. ’n Gesonde, normale liggaam vervaardig sowat ’n pint daarvan per dag, en enige afname in die helderheid van die vog is ’n aanduiding van infeksie of bloeding.

So ’n infeksie word meningitis genoem: swelling van die meninges, die membrane aan die binnekant van die kopbeen en die ruggraat wat in direkte kontak is met die serebrospinale vog. In vier uit vyf gevalle word infeksie deur ’n virus veroorsaak. Virale meningitis kan ’n pasiënt taamlik siek maak, maar dit is net in sowat 1 persent van gevalle noodlottig. Een uit vyf gevalle van meningitis word egter deur bakterieë veroorsaak. ’n Bakterie, wat ’n meer primitiewe organisme is, kan ’n gevaarliker teenstander wees as ’n virus. Bakteriële

meningitis is byna altyd noodlottig indien dit nie behandel word nie. Selfs al word dit gou met die gepaste antibiotika behandel, is die sterftesyfer tussen 15 en 40 persent.

Een van die mees onwaarskynlike oorsake van bakteriële meningitis in volwassenes is ’n baie ou en taai bakterie bekend as *Escherichia coli* – of sommer net *E. coli*. Niemand weet presies wat die ouderdom van *E. coli* is nie, maar dit word geskat op drie tot vier miljard jaar. Die organisme het geen nukleus nie en vermeerder deur die primitiewe maar uiters doeltreffende proses bekend as aseksuele binêre splitsing (dit wil sê deur in twee te deel). Dit kan voorgestel word as ’n sel wat hoofsaaklik RNA bevat en wat voedingstowwe regstreeks deur die selwand kan inneem (gewoonlik deur ander selle aan te val en te absorbeer). Verder kan die sel gelyktydig verskeie RNA-stringe kopieer en in twee verdeel – al om die twintig minute. Binne ’n halfuur sal daar agt wees. Binne twaalf uur 69 miljard. Teen uur vyftien sal daar 35 triljoen wees. Hierdie eksponensiële groei sal net ophou indien die voedingstowwe opraak.

E. coli is ook nie kieskeurig nie. Die selle ruil gene uit met ander bakteriële spesies deur ’n proses bekend as konjugasie, wat die *E. coli* in staat stel om maklik nuwe eienskappe aan te neem (soos weerstandigheid teen ’n nuwe antibiotikum), indien nodig. Hierdie suksesresep het verseker dat *E. coli* sedert die begin van eensellige lewe op aarde kon voortbestaan. Ons het almal *E. coli* in ons liggame – gewoonlik in die spysverteringskanaal. In normale omstandighede is dit nie vir ons ’n bedreiging nie. Maar waar *E. coli*-variëteite RNA-stringe opneem wat hulle besonder aggressief maak en hulle die serebrospinale vog om die rugmurg en brein laat binnedring, begin die primitiewe selle onmiddellik die glukose in die vog verteer, en wat ook al verder beskikbaar is, soos die brein self.

Niemand by die noodeenheid vermoed in hierdie stadium dat ek *E. coli*-meningitis het nie. Daar is geen rede nie. Die siekte is uiters seldsaam in volwassenes. Pasgeborenes is die mees algemene slagoffers, maar selfs gevalle van babas ouer as drie maande wat dit opdoen, is uitsonderlik. Minder as een in 10 miljoen volwassenes per jaar kry dit spontaan.

In die geval van bakteriële meningitis val die bakterieë die buitenste laag van die brein, of die korteks, eerste aan. Die woord korteks is

afgelei van die Latynse woord wat “skil” of “boombas” beteken. Die skil van ’n lemoen is ’n goeie beeld vir die manier waarop die korteks die meer primitiewe dele van die brein omring. Die korteks is verantwoordelik vir die geheue, taal, emosie, visie, gehoor, asook logika. Wanneer ’n organisme soos *E. coli* dus die brein aantas, word die areas wat die funksies verrig waar die kritieke menslike eienskappe gesetel is, eerste geaffekteer. Baie slagoffers van bakteriële meningitis sterf binne ’n paar dae nadat hulle die siekte opgedoen het. Van dié wat by ’n noodeenheid toegelaat word met ’n snelle afname in neurologiese funksie, soos in my geval, oorleef slegs 10 persent. En selfs dan is die kans goed dat hulle die res van hulle lewe in ’n vegetatiewe toestand sal deurbring.

Hoewel sy nie *E. coli*-meningitis vermoed nie, besef dr Potter dat ek een of ander soort breininfeksie kan hê, daarom het sy op ’n lumbale punksie besluit. Net toe sy gereed maak vir die prosedure, trek my liggaam styf, asof ek ’n elektriese skok gekry het. Ek gee ’n lang, angsvolle kreun, maak my rug krom en swaai my arms wild. My gesig raak rooi en die are in my nek bult. Laura roep nog helpers by en uiteindelik moet ses assistente my vasdruk vir die prosedure. Hulle dwing my liggaam in die fetale posisie terwyl Laura nog sedeermiddels toedien. Eindelik kan hulle my stil genoeg hou dat die naald in my rugmurg ingeplaas kan word.

Wanneer bakterieë die liggaam aanval, word die verdedigingsmeganismes onmiddellik geaktiveer. Witbloedselle word deur die milt en die beenmurg vrygestel om die indringers te beveg. Die witbloedselle is die eerste teken van ’n infeksie deur ’n vreemde biologiese organisme, en verlies van helderheid in die serebrospinale vog is ’n aanduiding van die teenwoordigheid van witbloedselle.

Dr Potter hou die manometer dop, die deursigtige vertikale buis waarin die serebrospinale vog sal uitloop. Haar eerste verrassing is dat die vog nie drup nie, maar uitstroom – vanweë gevaarlik hoë druk.

Haar tweede verrassing is die voorkoms van die vog. Die minste troebelheid sal aantoon dat ek in gevaar verkeer. Die vog wat in die manometer uitloop, is taai en wit, met ’n groen skynsel.

My spinale vog is vol etter.

3.

Out of Nowhere

Dr. Potter paged Dr. Robert Brennan, one of her associates at Lynchburg General and a specialist in infectious disease. While they waited for more test results to come from the adjacent labs, they considered all of the diagnostic possibilities and therapeutic options.

Minute by minute, as the test results came back, I continued to groan and squirm beneath the straps on my gurney. An ever more baffling picture was emerging. The Gram's stain (a chemical test, named after a Danish physician who invented the method, that allows doctors to classify an invading bacteria as either gram-negative or gram-positive) came back indicating gram-negative rods—which was highly unusual.

Meanwhile a computerized tomography (CT) scan of my head showed that the meningeal lining of my brain was dangerously swollen and inflamed. A breathing tube was put into my trachea, allowing a ventilator to take over the job of breathing for me—twelve breaths a minute, exactly—and a battery of monitors was set up around my bed to record every movement within my body and my now all-but-destroyed brain.

Of the very few adults who contract spontaneous *E. coli* bacterial meningitis (that is, without brain surgery or penetrating head trauma) each year, most do so because of some tangible cause, such as a deficiency in their immune system (often caused by HIV or AIDS). But I had no such factor that would have made me susceptible to the disease. Other bacteria might cause meningitis by invading from the adjacent nasal sinuses or middle ear, but not *E. coli*. The cerebrospinal space is too well sealed off from the rest of the body for that to happen. Unless the spine or skull is punctured (by a contaminated deep brain stimulator or a shunt installed by a neurosurgeon, for example), bacteria like *E. coli* that usually reside in the gut simply have no access to that area. I had installed hundreds of shunts and stimulators in the brains of patients myself, and had I been able to discuss the matter, I would have agreed with my stumped doctors that, to put it simply, I had a disease that was virtually impossible for me to have.

Still unable to completely accept the evidence being presented from the test results, the two doctors placed calls to experts in infectious disease at major academic medical centers. Everyone agreed that the results pointed to only one possible diagnosis.

But contracting a case of severe *E. coli* bacterial meningitis out of thin air was not the only strange medical feat I performed that first day in the hospital. In the final moments before leaving the emergency room, and after two straight hours of guttural animal wails and groaning, I became quiet. Then, out of nowhere, I shouted three words. They were crystal clear, and heard by all the doctors and nurses present, as well as by Holley, who stood a few paces away, just on the other side of the curtain.

"God, help me!"

Everyone rushed over to the stretcher. By the time they got to me, I was completely unresponsive.

I have no memory of my time in the ER, including those three words I shouted out. But they were the last I would speak for the next seven days.

3.

Uit die Niet

Dr Potter besluit om dr Robert Brennan, een van haar kollegas by Lynchburg General Hospital en ’n spesialis in aansteeklike siektes, te roep. Terwyl hulle wag vir verdere toetsresultate, oorweeg hulle al die diagnostiese moontlikhede en terapeutiese opsies.

Intussen lê ek nog steeds en kreun en wriemel op die trollie. Die siektebeeld raak al hoe meer verbysterend. ’n Gram-kleuring word gedoen, ’n chemiese toets wat vernoem is na ’n Deense medikus wat die metode ontwikkel het waarvolgens organismes as Gram-positief of Gram-negatief geklassifiseer word. Die toets toon Gram-negatiewe stafies – ’n uiters ongewone resultaat.

Intussen toon ’n rekenaartomografie (RT)-skandering van my kop dat die meninges gevaarlik opgeswel en geïnflammeer is. ’n Endotrageale buis word ingeplaas en ek word aan ’n ventilator gekoppel om my asemhaling te reguleer – presies twaalf asemhalings per minuut . ’n Hele ry monitors langs my bed hou rekord van elke verandering in my liggaam en my aangetaste brein.

By volwassenes wat spontaan *E. coli* bakteriële meningitis opdoen (dit wil sê sonder breinchirurgie of ’n penetrerende breinbesering), is daar meesal ’n duidelik aantoonbare oorsaak, soos ’n immuniteitstekort (wat dikwels deur MIV of VIGS veroorsaak word). Maar daar is nie so ’n faktor by my teenwoordig wat my vatbaar sou maak vir die siekte nie. Ander bakterieë kan meningitis veroorsaak deur die brein vanaf die naasliggende neussinusse of middeloor binne te dring, maar nie *E. coli* nie. Die serebrospinale ruimte is so goed van die res van die liggaam afgeseël dat so ’n infeksie onmoontlik sou wees. Tensy die ruggraat of die skedel deurboor word (byvoorbeeld deur ’n gekontamineerde diepbrein-stimuleerder of ’n stent wat deur ’n neurochirurg ingeplaas is), sal bakterieë wat gewoonlik in die dermkanaal voorkom, soos *E. coli*, geen toegang tot daardie area kry nie. Ek het self al honderde stente en stimuleerders in die brein van

pasiënte ingeplaas, en as ek die saak met my kollegas kon bespreek het, sou ek met hulle saamgestem het dat dit so te sê onmoontlik was dat ek die siekte kon hê wat ek wel onder lede gehad het.

Die twee dokters twyfel nog oor hoe hulle die resultate van al die ondersoeke moet vertolk en hulle doen navraag by deskundiges oor aansteeklike siektes by verskeie vooraanstaande mediese sentra. Almal stem egter saam dat die resultate op slegs een moontlike diagnose dui.

Maar dat ek uit die niet ’n ernstige aanval van *E. coli* bakteriële meningitis opgedoen het, is nie die enigste vreemde mediese verskynsel waarmee ek die eerste dag in die hospitaal vorendag kom nie. Net voordat ek uit die noodeenheid oorgeplaas sou word, en nadat ek twee uur lank soos ’n dier lê en kreun en steun het, raak ek stil. Toe, uit die bloute, skree ek drie woorde. Die woorde is klokhelder en word gehoor deur al die dokters en verpleegpersoneel wat teenwoordig is, asook deur Holley, ’n paar treë weg aan die ander kant van die gordyn.

“God, help my!”

Almal hardloop na die draagbaar toe. Teen die tyd dat hulle by my kom, toon ek geen reaksie meer nie.

Ek kan niks onthou van die tyd in die noodeenheid nie, ook nie die drie woorde wat ek uitgeroep het nie. Maar dit was die laaste woorde wat ek in die volgende sewe dae sou uiter.

4.

Eben IV

Once in Major Bay 1, I continued to decline. The cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) glucose level of a normal healthy person is around 80 milligrams per deciliter. An extremely sick person in imminent danger of dying from bacterial meningitis can have a level as low as 20 mg/dl.

I had a CSF glucose level of 1. My Glasgow Coma Scale was eight out of fifteen, indicative of a severe brain illness, and declined further over the next few days. My APACHE II score (Acute Physiology and Chronic Health Evaluation) in the ER was 18 out of a possible 71, indicating that the chances of my dying during that hospitalization were about 30 percent. More specifically, given my diagnosis of acute gram-negative bacterial meningitis and rapid neurological decline at the outset, I'd had, at best, only about a 10 percent chance of surviving my illness when I was admitted to the ER. If the antibiotics didn't kick in, the risk of mortality would rise steadily over the next few days—till it hit a nonnegotiable 100 percent.

The doctors loaded my body with three powerful intravenous antibiotics before sending me up to my new home: a large private room, number 10, in the Medical Intensive Care Unit, one floor above the ER.

I'd been in these ICUs many times as a surgeon. They are where the absolute sickest patients, people just inches from death, are placed, so that several medical personnel can work on them simultaneously. A team like that, fighting in complete coordination to keep a patient alive when all the odds are against them, is an awesome sight. I had felt both enormous pride and brutal disappointment in those rooms, depending on whether the patient we were struggling to save either made it or slipped from our fingers.

Dr. Brennan and the rest of the doctors stayed as upbeat with Holley as they could, given the circumstances. This didn't allow for their being at all upbeat. The truth was that I was at significant risk of dying, very soon. Even if I didn't die, the bacteria attacking my brain had probably already devoured enough of my cortex to compromise any higher-brain activity. The longer I stayed in coma, the more likely

it became that I would spend the rest of my life in a chronic vegetative state.

Fortunately, not only the staff of Lynchburg General but other people, too, were already gathering to help. Michael Sullivan, our neighbor and the rector in our Episcopal church, arrived at the ER about an hour after Holley. Just as Holley had run out the door to follow the ambulance, her cell phone had buzzed. It was her longtime friend Sylvia White. Sylvia always had an uncanny way of reaching out precisely when important things were happening. Holley was convinced she was psychic. (I had opted for the safer and more sensible explanation that she was just a very good guesser.) Holley briefed Sylvia on what was happening, and between them they made calls to my immediate family: my younger sister, Betsy, who lived nearby, my sister Phyllis, at forty-eight the youngest of us, who was living in Boston, and Jean, the oldest.

That Monday morning Jean was driving south through Virginia from her home in Delaware. Fortuitously, she was on her way to help our mother, who lived in Winston-Salem. Jean's cell phone rang. It was her husband, David.

"Have you gone through Richmond yet?" he asked.

"No," Jean said. "I'm just north of it on I-95."

"Get onto route 60 West, then route 24 down to Lynchburg. Holley just called. Eben's in the emergency room there. He had a seizure this morning and isn't responding."

"Oh, my God! Do they have any idea why?"

"They're not sure, but it might be meningitis."

Jean made the turn just in time and followed the undulating two-lane blacktop of 60 West through low, scudding clouds, toward Route 24 and Lynchburg.

It was Phyllis who, at three o'clock that first afternoon of the emergency, called Eben IV at his apartment at the University of Delaware. Eben was outside on his porch doing some science homework (my own dad had been a neurosurgeon, and Eben was interested in that career now as well) when his phone rang. Phyllis gave him a quick rundown of the situation and told him not to worry—that the doctors had everything under control.

"Do they have any idea what it might be?" Eben asked.

"Well, they did mention gram-negative bacteria and meningitis."

"I have two exams in the next few days, so I'm going to leave some quick messages with my teachers," said Eben.

Eben later told me that, initially, he was hesitant to believe that I was in as grave danger as Phyllis had indicated, since she and Holley always "blew things out of proportion"—*and* I never got sick. But when Michael Sullivan called him on the phone an hour later, he realized that he needed to make the drive down—*immediately*.

As Eben drove toward Virginia, an icy pelting rain started up. Phyllis had left Boston at six o'clock, and as Eben headed toward the I-495 bridge over the Potomac River into Virginia, she was passing through the clouds overhead. She landed at Richmond, rented a car, and got onto Route 60 herself.

When he was just a few miles outside Lynchburg, Eben called Holley.

"How's Bond?" he asked.

"Asleep," Holley said.

"I'm going to go straight to the hospital then," Eben said.

"You sure you don't want to come home first?"

"No," Eben said. "I just want to see Dad."

Eben pulled up at the Medical Intensive Care Unit at 11:15 P.M. The walkway into the hospital was starting to ice over, and when he came into the bright lights of the reception area he saw only a night reception nurse. She led him to my ICU bed.

By that point, everyone who had been there earlier had finally gone home. The only sounds in the large, dimly lit room were the quiet beeps and hisses of the machines keeping my body going.

Eben froze in the doorway when he saw me. In his twenty years, he'd never seen me with more than a cold. Now, in spite of all the machines doing their best to make it seem otherwise, he was looking at what he knew was, essentially, a corpse. My physical body was there in front of him, but the dad he knew was gone.

Or perhaps a better word to use is: elsewhere.

4.

Eben IV

Ek word in intensiewe sorg geplaas, maar my toestand versleg steeds. Die glukosevlak in die serebrospinale vog (SSV) van ’n normale, gesonde mens is sowat 80 milligram per desiliter. ’n Uiters siek mens met bakteriële meningitis wat op die randjie van die dood is, kan ’n vlak van so laag as 20 mg/dl hê.

My SSV-glukosevlak is 1 mg/dl. My Glasgow Komaskaal is agt uit vyftien, ’n aanduiding van ernstige breinsiekte, en sou binne die daaropvolgende paar dae verder verswak. My APACHE II-telling (Acute Physiology and Chronic Health Evaluation) in die noodeenheid was 18 uit ’n moontlike 71, wat daarop dui dat my kans om te sterf sowat 30 persent was. Met inagneming van die diagnose van akute Gram-negatiewe bakteriële meningitis en die vinnige neurologiese agteruitgang, het ek by toelating tot die noodeenheid net sowat ’n tienpersentkans gehad om te oorleef. As die antibiotika nie begin werk nie, sal die mortaliteitsrisiko binne die volgende paar dae onverbiddelik styg – totdat dit die onomkeerbare 100 persent bereik.

Voordat ek na my nuwe tuiste, ’n groot private saal, nommer 10, in die intensiewesorgeenheid oorgeplaas word, besluit die dokters om aan my drie kragtige intraveneuse antibiotika toe te dien.

As chirurg het ek dikwels intensiewesorgeenhede besoek. Die heel siekste pasiënte, dié wat op die randjie van die dood is, word hier geplaas waar hulle tegelyk deur ’n hele span mediese personeel behandel kan word. So ’n span wat op gekoördineerde wyse saamwerk om ’n pasiënt tot elke prys aan die lewe te probeer hou, is ’n indrukwekkende gesig. In hierdie soort omstandighede het ek as dokter nie net geweldige trots nie, maar ook bitter teleurstelling ervaar – na gelang van die sukses wat ons gehad om die pasiënt se lewe te red.

Dr Brennan en die ander dokters bly so positief teenoor Holley as moontlik in die omstandighede. Dit beteken nie dat hulle so positief

voel nie. Inderwaarheid is die kans groot dat ek binnekort kan sterf. Selfs al sou ek nie sterf nie, het die die bakterieë wat my brein aanval waarskynlik reeds aansienlike dele van my korteks vernietig en alle hoërbrein-aktiwiteit in gevaar gestel. Hoe langer ek in 'n koma bly, hoe groter is die kans dat ek die res van my lewe in 'n chroniese vegetatiewe toestand sal deurbring.

Gelukkig is daar benewens die personeel van Lynchburg General Hospital ook ander mense wat regstaan om te help. Michael Sullivan, ons buurman en die predikant van ons gemeente, kom 'n uur na Holley by die noodeenheid aan. Net toe Holley by die deur uit is om agter die ambulans aan te ry, lui haar selfoon. Dit is haar ou vriendin Sylvia White. Sylvia het die vermoë om altyd uit te reik wanneer belangrike dinge gebeur. Holley is oortuig dat sy heldersiende is. (Ek het altyd die veiliger en verstandiger verklaring verkies dat sy maar net goed kan raai.) Holley vertel Sylvia kortliks wat aan die gang is, en Sylvia help om gou my naaste familie te bel: my jonger suster Betsy, wat naby woon, my jongste suster Phyllis, wat in Boston woon en Jean, die oudste.

Dié Maandagoggend is Jean toevallig van haar tuisdorp in Delaware in 'n suidelike rigting deur Virginië op pad om ons ma te help, wat in Winston-Salem woon. Jean se selfoon lui. Dis haar man, David.

"Is jy al verby Richmond?" vra hy.

"Nee," antwoord Jean. "Ek is net noord van Richmond op die I-95."

"Neem Roete 60 wes, dan Roete 24 na Lynchburg toe. Holley het nou net gebel. Eben is in die noodeenheid daar. Hy het vanoggend 'n toeval gehad en is nou bewusteloos."

"Ag nee, weet hulle wat is fout?"

"Hulle is nie seker nie, maar dit kan meningitis wees."

Jean neem net betyds die afrit en ry met die sekondêre Roete 60 wes, op en af oor die heuwels en deur die lae wolke in die rigting van Roete 24 en Lynchburg.

Phyllis is die een wat drieuur die middag vir Eben IV by sy woonstel by die Universiteit van Delaware bel. Eben sit buite op die stoep besig met 'n wetenskaptaak toe sy foon lui. (My pa was self 'n neurochirurg, en Eben stel ook belang in dié rigting.) Phyllis bring hom gou op hoogte van wat gebeur het en stel hom gerus – die dokters het alles onder beheer.

“Het hulle enige idee wat dit kan wees?” wil Eben weet.

“Wel, hulle praat van Gram-negatiewe bakterieë en meningitis.”

“Ek het twee eksamens in die volgende paar dae, ek moet net vir my dosente laat weet.”

Eben het my later vertel dat hy aanvanklik nie vir Phyllis wou glo dat ek in groot gevaar verkeer nie, omdat sy en Holley “altyd dinge oordryf” – *en* ek nooit siek word nie. Maar toe Michael Sullivan hom ’n uur later bel, besef hy dat hy hospitaal toe moet gaan – *onmiddellik*.

Eben is nog op pad toe dit begin dit reën, ’n ysige, deurdringende bui. Phyllis het sesuur uit Boston vertrek, en toe Eben die brug oor die Potomac-rivier oorsteek tot in Virginië, vlieg sy deur die wolke bokant hom. Haar vlug land op Richmond, sy huur ’n motor en neem Roete 60 na Lynchburg.

’n Paar myl buite Lynchburg bel Eben vir Holley.

“Hoe gaan dit met Bond?” vra hy.

“Hy slaap al,” sê Holley.

“Dan gaan ek reguit hospitaal toe.”

“Is jy seker jy wil nie eers huis toe kom nie?”

“Nee, ek wil net vir Pa sien.”

Eben hou om 11:15 nm by die intensiewesorgafdeling van die hospitaal stil. Die paadjie na die hospitaal is al toe onder die ys. Die ontvangsarea is helder verlig en daar is net ’n nagsuster. Sy neem hom na my bed in die intensiewesorgeenheid.

Almal wat vroeër die dag daar was, het intussen huis toe gegaan. Die enigste geluide in die groot skemerdonker vertrek is die sagte suis- en biepgeluide van die masjiene wat my aan die gang hou.

Eben steek vas in die deur toe hy my sien. In sy twintig jaar het hy my nog nooit met meer as ’n verkoue gesien nie. Nou, ondanks al die toerusting wat my oënskynlik aan die lewe hou, sien hy iets wat in alle praktiese opsigte ’n lyk is. My fisieke liggaam lê daar voor hom, maar die pa wat hy geken het, is weg.

Of miskien is ’n beter woord om te gebruik: elders.

5.

Underworld

Darkness, but a visible darkness—like being submerged in mud yet also being able to see through it. Or maybe dirty Jell-O describes it better. Transparent, but in a bleary, blurry, claustrophobic, suffocating kind of way.

Consciousness, but consciousness without memory or identity—like a dream where you know what's going on around you, but have no real idea of who, or what, *you* are.

Sound, too: a deep, rhythmic pounding, distant yet strong, so that each pulse of it goes right through you. Like a heartbeat? A little, but darker, more mechanical—like the sound of metal against metal, as if a giant, subterranean blacksmith is pounding an anvil somewhere off in the distance: pounding it so hard that the sound vibrates through the earth, or the mud, or wherever it is that you are.

I didn't have a body—not one that I was aware of anyway. I was simply . . . *there*, in this place of pulsing, pounding darkness. At the time, I might have called it "primordial." But at the time it was going on, I didn't know this word. In fact, I didn't know any words at all. The words used here registered much later, when, back in the world, I was writing down my recollections. Language, emotion, logic: these were all gone, as if I had regressed back to some state of being from the very beginnings of life, as far back, perhaps, as the primitive bacteria that, unbeknownst to me, had taken over my brain and shut it down.

How long did I reside in this world? I have no idea. When you go to a place where there's no sense of time as we experience it in the ordinary world, accurately describing the way it feels is next to impossible. When it was happening, when I was there, I felt like I (whatever "I" was) had always been there and would always continue to be.

Nor, initially at least, did I mind this. Why would I, after all, since this state of being was the only one I'd ever known? Having no memory of anything better, I was not particularly bothered by where I was. I do recall conceptualizing that I might or might not survive, but my indifference as to whether I did or not only gave me a greater

feeling of invulnerability. I was clueless as to the rules that governed this world I was in, but I was in no hurry to learn them. After all, why bother?

I can't say exactly when it happened, but at a certain point I became aware of some objects around me. They were a little like roots, and a little like blood vessels in a vast, muddy womb. Glowing a dark, dirty red, they reached down from some place far above to some other place equally far below. In retrospect, looking at them was like being a mole or earthworm, buried deep in the ground yet somehow able to see the tangled matrixes of roots and trees surrounding it.

That's why, thinking back to this place later, I came to call it the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View. For a long time, I suspected it might have been some kind of memory of what my brain felt like during the period when the bacteria were originally overrunning it.

But the more I thought about this explanation (and again, this was all much, much later), the less sense it made. Because—hard as this is to picture if you haven't been to this place yourself—my consciousness wasn't foggy or distorted when I was there. It was just . . . *limited.* I wasn't human while I was in this place. I wasn't even animal. I was something before, and below, all that. I was simply a lone point of awareness in a timeless red-brown sea.

The longer I stayed in this place, the less comfortable I became. At first I was so deeply immersed in it that there was no difference between "me" and the half-creepy, half-familiar element that surrounded me. But gradually this sense of deep, timeless, and boundaryless immersion gave way to something else: a feeling like I wasn't really part of this subterranean world at all, but trapped in it.

Grotesque animal faces bubbled out of the muck, groaned or screeched, and then were gone again. I heard an occasional dull roar. Sometimes these roars changed to dim, rhythmic chants, chants that were both terrifying and weirdly familiar—as if at some point I'd known and uttered them all myself.

As I had no memory of prior existence, my time in this realm stretched way, way out. Months? Years? Eternity? Regardless of the answer, I eventually got to a point where the creepy-crawly feeling totally outweighed the homey, familiar feeling. The more I began to feel like a *me*—like something separate from the cold and wet and dark around me—the more the faces that bubbled up out of that darkness became ugly and threatening. The rhythmic pounding off in the distance sharpened and intensified as well—became the work-beat

for some army of troll-like underground laborers, performing some endless, brutally monotonous task. The movement around me became less visual and more tactile, as if reptilian, wormlike creatures were crowding past, occasionally rubbing up against me with their smooth or spiky skins.

Then I became aware of a smell: a little like feces, a little like blood, and a little like vomit. A *biological* smell, in other words, but of biological death, not of biological life. As my awareness sharpened more and more, I edged ever closer to panic. Whoever or whatever I was, I did not belong here. I needed to get out.

But where would I go?

Even as I asked that question, something new emerged from the darkness above: something that wasn't cold, or dead, or dark, but the exact opposite of all those things. If I tried for the rest of my life, I would never be able to do justice to this entity that now approached me . . . to come anywhere close to describing how beautiful it was.

But I'm going to try.

5.

Onderwêreld

Donkerte, maar ’n sigbare donkerte – soos om in modder weg te sink, maar tog daardeur te kan sien. Of soos troebel jellie. Deursigtig, maar tog dof, wasig, newelagtig, benouend.

Bewussyn, maar bewussyn sonder herinnering of identiteit – soos ’n droom waar mens weet wat om jou gebeur, maar jy weet nie regtig wie, of wat, *jy* is nie.

Klank, ook: ’n diep, ritmiese geklop, veraf, maar tog so sterk dat elke pols regdeur jou gaan. Soos ’n hartklop? ’n Bietjie, maar donkerder, meer meganies – soos die geluid van metaal op metaal, asof ’n ondergrondse reusesmid iewers in die verte op ’n aambeeld kap: so hard kap dat die geluid deur die aarde dreun, of die modder, of watter plek dit ook al is waar jy jou bevind.

Ek het nie ’n liggaam nie – altans nie een waarvan ek bewus is nie. Ek is net … daar, in ’n polsende, kloppende donkerte. Ek sou dit “primordiaal” kon noem. Maar toe het ek nie hierdie woord geken nie. Trouens, ek het geen woorde geken nie. Die woorde wat ek hier gebruik, het veel later by my opgekom, terug in die wêreld, toe ek my herinneringe begin neerskryf. Taal, emosie, logika: dit was alles weg, asof ek teruggegaan het na ’n vroeë bestaan, na die begin van lewe, miskien so ver terug as die primitiewe bakterieë wat, sonder my wete, my brein oorgeneem en dit tot stilstand gebring het.

Hoe lank het ek in hierdie wêreld vertoef? Ek het geen benul nie. Wanneer mens na ’n plek toe gaan waar daar nie ’n tydsbegrip is soos ons dit in die gewone wêreld ervaar nie, is dit bykans onmoontlik om te beskryf hoe dit voel. Terwyl dit aan die gang was, toe ek daar was, het dit gevoel asof ek (wat “ek” ook al was) nog altyd daar was en altyd sou wees.

Dit het my nie gepla nie, altans nie aan die begin nie. Hierdie bestaanstoestand was tog al wat ek geken het, ek het van niks beters geweet nie, dus het ek nie juis omgegee waar ek my bevind nie. Ek

onthou wel dat die gedagte by my opgekom het dat ek miskien nie sou oorleef nie, maar die feit dat dit my nie juis ontstel het nie, het my nog meer onaantasbaar laat voel. Ek het geen idee gehad watter reëls geld in die wêreld waar ek was nie, maar ek was nie juis haastig om uit te vind nie. Waarom sou ek wees?

Ek kan nie sê presies wanneer dit gebeur het nie, maar op ’n bepaalde tydstip begin ek bewus raak van voorwerpe om my, boomwortels of bloedvate, wat donker rooi skyn en van iewers ver bo afloop tot iewers ewe ver onder. Terugskouend was dit soos om ’n mol of ’n erdwurm te wees wat onder die grond ingegrawe is en tog die verstrengelde patrone van boomwortels en boomstamme en -takke te kan sien. Daarom, toe ek later aan hierdie plek terugdink, het ek dit ’n naam gegee: die Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief.

Aanvanklik het ek vermoed dit was ’n soort terugflits van hoe my brein gevoel het terwyl dit deur die bakterieë aangeval is. Maar, hoe meer ek oor hierdie verklaring nagedink het (en dit was natuurlik eers veel later), hoe minder het dit sin gemaak. As mens nie self by hierdie plek was nie, is dit vir jou moeilik om ’n voorstelling daarvan te maak – my bewussyn was nie beneweld of verwronge terwyl ek daar was nie. Dit was net … *beperk*. Ek was nie soos ’n mens terwyl ek daar was nie. Ek was nie eens ’n dier nie. Ek was iets voor, en onder, dit alles. Ek was bloot ’n enkele bewuste punt in ’n tydlose rooibruin see.

Hoe langer ek in hierdie plek vertoef het, hoe minder tuis het ek gevoel. Aan die begin was ek so deel daarvan dat daar geen verskil tussen “my” en die half-grillige, halfbekende element om my was nie. Maar geleidelik gaan die gevoel van diep, tydlose en grenslose vervloeiing oor in iets anders: ’n gevoel dat ek nie werklik deel is van hierdie onderaardse wêreld nie, maar daarin vasgevang is. Groteske droggesigte verskyn uit die modder, kreun en gil, en verdwyn weer. Af en toe hoor ek ’n gedempte brul. Soms klink die gebrul soos veraf, ritmiese gesange, gesange wat tegelyk vreesaanjaend en bekend is – asof ek dit self op een of ander tydstip geken het en ook daardie geluide gemaak het. Omdat ek glad nie ’n vorige bestaan onthou het nie, was my tyd in hierdie ryk lank uitgerek. Maande? Jare? ’n Ewigheid? Hoe lank dit ook al was, die grillige gevoel het uiteindelik die knus, bekende gevoel heeltemal oorheers.

Hoe meer ek soos ’n *ek* begin voel – soos iets aparts van die koue,

nat donkerte om my – hoe leliker en dreigender is die gesigte wat uit die donkerte opdoem. Die ritmiese geklop in die verte klink ook skerper en harder – soos die sweepslag vir 'n ondergrondse werkspan wat die een of ander eindelose, uitmergelend eentonige taak moet verrig. Die beweging om my raak minder visueel en meer voelbaar, asof reptielagtige of wurmagtige gediertes by my verbystroom en soms teen my skuur met gladde of stekelige velle.

Toe raak ek bewus van 'n reuk: 'n bietjie soos feses, 'n bietjie soos bloed, en 'n bietjie soos braaksel. Met ander woorde, 'n *biologiese* reuk, maar soos biologiese dood, nie soos biologiese lewe nie. Namate my bewussyn verskerp, beweeg ek al hoe nader aan paniek. Wie of wat ek ook al is, ek hoort nie hier nie. Ek moet wegkom.

Maar waarheen?

Net toe ek daardie vraag vra, kom iets nuuts uit die donkerte bokant my te voorskyn: iets wat nie koud, of dood, of donker is nie, maar juis die teenoorgestelde van al hierdie dinge.

Al sou ek die res van my lewe probeer, sou ek nooit kon laat reg geskied aan die entiteit wat nou na my toe aangekom het nie … nie naastenby kon beskryf hoe wonderskoon dit was nie.

Maar ek gaan probeer.

6.

An Anchor to Life

Phyllis pulled into the hospital parking lot just under two hours after Eben IV had, at around 1 A.M. When she got to my ICU room she found Eben IV sitting next to my bed, clutching a hospital pillow in front of him to help him keep awake.

"Mom's home with Bond," Eben said, in a tone that was tired, tense, and happy to see her, all at once.

Phyllis told Eben he needed to go home, that if he stayed up all night after driving from Delaware he'd be worthless to anyone tomorrow, his dad included. She called Holley and Jean at our house and told them Eben IV would be back soon but that she was staying in my room for the night.

"Go home to your mom and your aunt and your brother," she said to Eben IV when she'd hung up. "They need you. Your dad and I will be right here when you get back tomorrow."

Eben IV looked over at my body: at the clear plastic breathing tube running through my right nostril down to my trachea; at my thin, already chapping lips; at my closed eyes and sagging facial muscles.

Phyllis read his thoughts.

"Go home, Eben. Try not to worry. Your dad's still with us. And I'm not going to let him go."

She walked to my bedside, picked up my hand, and started to massage it. With only the machines and the night nurse who came in to check my stats every hour for company, Phyllis sat through the rest of the night, holding my hand, keeping a connection going that she knew full well was vital if I was going to get through this.

It's a cliché to talk about what a big emphasis people in the South put on family, but like a lot of clichés, it's also true. When I went to Harvard in 1988, one of the first things I noticed about northerners was the way they were a little shyer about expressing a fact that many in the South take for granted: Your family is *who you are*.

Throughout my own life, my relationship with my family—with my parents and sisters, and later with Holley, Eben IV, and Bond—had always been a vital source of strength and stability, but even more so in recent years. Family was where I turned for unquestioning support

in a world that—North or South—can all too often be short of this commodity.

I went to our Episcopal church with Holley and the kids on occasion. But the fact was that for years I'd only been a step above a "C & E'er" (one who only darkens the door of a church at Christmas and Easter). I encouraged our boys to say their prayers at night, but I was no spiritual leader in our home. I'd never escaped my feelings of doubt at how any of it could really *be*. As much as I'd grown up wanting to believe in God and Heaven and an afterlife, my decades in the rigorous scientific world of academic neurosurgery had profoundly called into question how such things could exist. Modern neuroscience dictates that the brain gives rise to consciousness—to the mind, to the soul, to the spirit, to whatever you choose to call that invisible, intangible part of us that truly makes us who we are—and I had little doubt that it was correct.

Like most health-care workers who deal directly with dying patients and their families, I had heard about—and even seen—some pretty inexplicable events over the years. I filed those occurrences under "unknown" and let them be, figuring a commonsense answer of one kind or another lay at the heart of them all.

Not that I was opposed to supernatural beliefs. As a doctor who saw incredible physical and emotional suffering on a regular basis, the last thing I would have wanted to do was to deny anyone the comfort and hope that faith provided. In fact, I would have loved to have enjoyed some of it myself.

The older I got, however, the less likely that seemed. Like an ocean wearing away a beach, over the years my scientific worldview gently but steadily undermined my ability to believe in something larger. Science seemed to be providing a steady onslaught of evidence that pushed our significance in the universe ever closer to zero. Belief would have been nice. But science is not concerned with what would be nice. It's concerned with what *is*.

I'm a kinetic learner, which is just to say that I learn by doing. If I can't feel something or touch it myself, it's hard for me to take interest in it. That desire to reach out and touch whatever I'm trying to understand was, along with the desire to be like my father, what drew me to neurosurgery. As abstract and mysterious as the human brain is, it's also incredibly concrete. As a medical student at Duke, I relished looking into a microscope and actually seeing the delicately elongated neuronal cells that spark the synaptic connections that give rise to

consciousness. I loved the combination of abstract knowledge and total physicality that brain surgery presented. To access the brain, one must pull away the layers of skin and tissue covering the skull and apply a high-speed pneumatic device called a Midas Rex drill. It's a very sophisticated piece of equipment, costing thousands of dollars. Yet when you get down to it, it's also just . . . a drill.

Likewise, surgically repairing the brain, while an extraordinarily complex undertaking, is actually no different than fixing any other highly delicate, electrically charged machine. That, I knew full well, is what the brain really is: a machine that produces the phenomenon of consciousness. Sure, scientists hadn't discovered exactly how the neurons of the brain managed to do this, but it was only a matter of time before they would. This was proven every day in the operating room. A patient comes in with headaches and diminished consciousness. You obtain an MRI (magnetic resonance image) of her brain and discover a tumor. You place the patient under general anesthesia, remove the tumor, and a few hours later she's waking up to the world again. No more headaches. No more trouble with consciousness. Seemingly pretty simple.

I adored that simplicity—the absolute honesty and *cleanness* of science. I respected that it left no room for fantasy or for sloppy thinking. If a fact could be established as tangible and trustworthy, it was accepted. If not, then it was rejected.

This approach left very little room for the soul and the spirit, for the continuing existence of a personality after the brain that supported it stopped functioning. It left even less room for those words I'd heard in church again and again: "life everlasting."

Which is why I counted on my family—on Holley and our boys and my three sisters and, of course, my mom and dad—so much. In a very real sense, I'd never have been able to practice my profession—to perform, day in and day out, the actions I performed, and to see the things I saw—without the bedrock support of love and understanding they provided.

And that was why Phyllis (after consulting our sister Betsy on the phone) decided that night to make a promise to me on behalf of our whole family. As she sat there with my limp, nearly lifeless hand in hers, she told me that no matter what happened from then on, someone would always be right there, holding my hand.

"We are not letting you go, Eben," she said. "You need an anchor to keep you here, in this world, where we need you. And we'll provide

it."

Little did she know just how important that anchor was going to prove in the days to come.

6.

Geanker aan die Lewe

Phyllis hou stil op die hospitaalparkeerterrein, sowat twee uur nadat Eben IV daar aangekom het. Toe sy by my kamer in die intensiewesorgeenheid kom, tref sy vir Eben langs my bed aan, met ’n hospitaalkussing in sy arms vasgeklem om hom te help wakker bly.

“Ma is by die huis, by Bond,” sê hy. Sy stem klink tegelyk moeg, gespanne en bly oom haar te sien.

Phyllis sê Eben moet huis toe gaan, want as hy heelnag wakker bly nadat hy die hele ent van Delaware af gery het, sal hy vir niemand iets werd wees nie, allermins vir sy pa. Sy bel vir Holley en Jean by die huis om te sê dat Eben IV binnekort daar sal wees, maar dat sy by my sal bly vir die nag.

“Gaan huis toe,” sê sy vir Eben IV nadat sy met hulle gepraat het, “jou ma en tannie Jean en Bond het jou nodig. Jou pa en ek sal net hier wees wanneer jy more terugkom.”

Eben IV kyk na waar ek lê; na die deurskynende plastiekbuisie wat deur my regterneusgat in my keel afloop; na my dun, reeds gebarste lippe; na my geslote oë en slap gesigspiere.

Phyllis lees sy gedagtes.

“Gaan huis toe, Eben. Moenie bekommerd wees nie. Jou pa is nog met ons. En ek sal hom nie laat gaan nie.”

Sy kom langs my staan, neem my hand en begin dit vryf. Met net die masjiene en die nagsuster wat uurliks my lesings kom neem as geselskap, bly Phyllis die hele nag lank by my sit, hou my hand vas, hou ’n verbinding met my aan die gang wat sy weet noodsaaklik is om my deur hierdie ding te kry.

Die mense in die suide heg groot waarde aan familie. Toe ek in 1988 Harvard toe is, was een van die eerste dinge wat my omtrent die mense van die noorde opgeval het, die feit dat hulle meer terughoudend is wanneer dit by familie kom. In die suide is dit ’n algemeen aanvaarde feit: Jou familie is *wie jy is*.

Dwarsdeur my lewe was my familie en my gesin – my ouers en susters, en later Holley, Eben IV en Bond – nog altyd ’n bron van krag en stabiliteit, en veral in die voorafgaande jare. Familie is waar ek onvoorwaardelike ondersteuning gevind het in ’n wêreld waar daar alte dikwels ’n tekort aan hierdie kommoditeit bestaan, hetsy noord of suid.

Ek het by geleentheid saam met Holley en die kinders na ons Episkopaalse kerk toe gegaan. Maar dit is ook waar dat ek jare lank nie veel meer as ’n K&P-lidmaat was nie (een wat net met Kersfees en Pase die kerk besoek). Ek het die seuns aangemoedig om saans hulle gebedjies op te sê, maar ek was nie ’n geestelike leier in ons huis nie. Ek kon nooit van my twyfelgevoelens ontslae raak oor hoe dit alles kan waar wees nie. Hoewel ek grootgeword het met die begeerte om in God en die hemel en die hiernamaals te glo, kon ek nie anders as om ná jare lange blootstelling aan die veeleisende wetenskaplike wêreld van akademiese neurochirurgie hierdie begrippe te bevraagteken nie. Volgens moderne neurologie is die bewussyn in die brein gesetel – die psige, die siel, die gees, of wat mens ook al daardie onsigbare, ontasbare deel van ons wil noem wat ons identiteit bepaal – en ek het geglo dit is waar.

Soos die meeste gesondheidsorgwerkers wat direk met sterwende pasiënte en hulle gesinne werk, het ek deur die jare van heelwat onverklaarbare gebeure gehoor, of dit self waargeneem. Ek het hierdie gebeure onder die etiket “onbekend” geklassifiseer en dit daar gelaat, met die gedagte dat daar iewers ’n logiese verklaring vir elkeen is.

Dit beteken nie dat ek gekant was teen geloof in die bonatuurlike nie. As dokter wat gereeld uiterste fisieke en emosionele lyding in pasiënte gesien het, sou ek nooit iemand die gerusstelling en hoop van geloof wou ontsê nie. Trouens, ek sou self ’n bietjie daarvan kon gebruik.

Hoe ouer ek geword het, hoe minder waarskynlik het dit egter geraak. Soos branders ’n strand wegkalwe, so is my vermoë om aan iets groters te glo geleidelik deur my wetenskaplike wêreldbeskouing ondermyn. Dit was asof die wetenskap ’n konstante stroom bewyse oplewer wat die mens se betekenis in die heelal al hoe nader aan nul dwing. Ek sou graag wou glo, maar wetenskap is nie gemoeid met wat mens graag wil nie. Dit is gemoeid met wat *is*.

Ek is ’n kinetiese leerder, dit wil sê, ek leer deur te doen. As ek iets nie self kan voel of aanraak nie, interesseer dit my nie juis nie. Die begeerte om my hand uit te steek en te raak aan iets wat ek probeer verstaan, is wat my na neurochirurgie aangetrek het. Al is die mens se brein hoe abstrak en geheimsinnig, is dit ook besonder konkreet. As mediese student by Duke was dit vir my boeiend om deur die mikroskoop te kyk en die delikate, langwerpige neuronselle te sien wat die sinapskonneksies maak wat bewussyn moontlik maak. Dit is juis die kombinasie van abstrakte kennis en praktiese toepassing wat breinchirurgie vir my so interessant maak. Om by die brein uit te kom, moet ’n mens die vel en weefsel wat die kopbeen bedek, verwyder en dan ’n hoëspoed-pneumatiese implement gebruik, bekend as ’n Midas Rex-boor. Dit is ’n uiters gevorderde stukkie gereedskap wat duisende dollar skos. Maar basies is dit ook maar net … ’n boor.

Hoewel chirurgie van die brein ’n hoogs ingewikkelde proses is, is dit ook nie veel anders as om aan ’n hoogs delikate, elektries gelaaide masjien te werk nie. Dit was hoe ek die brein verstaan het: as ’n masjien wat bewussyn produseer. Toegegee, wetenskaplikes kon nog nie vasstel presies hoe die neurone in brein dit laat gebeur nie, maar dit is net ’n kwessie van tyd voordat hulle dit ook sal weet. Dit word elke dag in die operasieteater bewys. ’n Pasiënt word toegelaat met hoofpyne en ’n aangetaste bewussyn. ’n MRI-skandering van die haar brein wys daar is ’n tumor. Die pasiënt word onder algemene narkose geplaas, die tumor word verwyder en ’n paar uur later is sy weer wakker. Hoofpyn weg. Bewussyn herstel. Op die oog af heel eenvoudig.

Dit was hierdie eenvoud wat my tot die wetenskap aangetrek het – die eerlikheid en ordelikheid daarvan. Ek het daarvan gehou dat die wetenskap geen ruimte vir fantasie of vir slordige denke laat nie. As ’n feit bevestig kan word, as dit tasbaar en betroubaar is, dan word dit aanvaar. Indien nie, word dit verwerp.

Hierdie benadering laat baie min ruimte vir die siel en die gees, vir die voortgesette bestaan van ’n identiteit nadat die brein ophou funksioneer het. Dit laat nog minder ruimte vir die woorde wat ek gereeld in die kerk gehoor het: “ewige lewe”.

Dit is waarom ek soveel op my gesin en familie staatgemaak het – op Holley en ons seuns en my drie susters en, natuurlik, op my ouers.

Ek sou beslis nie my beroep kon beoefen het, elke dag my take verrig en alles verwerk wat ek beleef, sonder hulle standvastige liefde en ondersteuning nie.

Daardie aand langs my bed het Phyllis dit weer eens bewys. Sy het namens ons hele familie aan my ’n belofte gemaak, nadat sy eers met ons sus Betsy oor die foon gesels het. Met my slap, byna lewelose hand in hare het sy vir my gesê dat wat ook al verder gebeur, daar altyd iemand sal wees wat my hand vashou.

“Ons sal jou nie laat gaan nie, Eben,” het sy gesê. “Jy het ’n anker nodig om jou hier by ons te hou, in hierdie wêreld, waar ons jou nodig het.”

Min het sy geweet hóé belangrik daardie anker in die volgende paar dae sou wees.

7.

The Spinning Melody and the Gateway

Something had appeared in the darkness.

Turning slowly, it radiated fine filaments of white-gold light, and as it did so the darkness around me began to splinter and break apart.

Then I heard a new sound: a *living* sound, like the richest, most complex, most beautiful piece of music you've ever heard. Growing in volume as a pure white light descended, it obliterated the monotonous mechanical pounding that, seemingly for eons, had been my only company up until then.

The light got closer and closer, spinning around and around and generating those filaments of pure white light that I now saw were tinged, here and there, with hints of gold.

Then, at the very center of the light, something else appeared. I focused my awareness, hard, trying to figure out what it was.

An opening. I was no longer looking *at* the slowly spinning light at all, but *through* it.

The moment I understood this, I began to move up. Fast. There was a whooshing sound, and in a flash I went through the opening and found myself in a completely new world. The strangest, most beautiful world I'd ever seen.

Brilliant, vibrant, ecstatic, stunning . . . I could heap on one adjective after another to describe what this world looked and felt like, but they'd all fall short. I felt like I was being born. Not reborn, or born again. Just . . . born.

Below me there was countryside. It was green, lush, and earthlike. It *was* earth . . . but at the same time it wasn't. It was like when your parents take you back to a place where you spent some years as a very young child. You don't know the place. Or at least you think you don't. But as you look around, something pulls at you, and you realize that a part of yourself—a part way, deep down—does remember the place after all, and is rejoicing at being back there again.

I was flying, passing over trees and fields, streams and waterfalls, and here and there, people. There were children, too, laughing and playing. The people sang and danced around in circles, and sometimes I'd see a dog, running and jumping among them, as full of joy as the

people were. They wore simple yet beautiful clothes, and it seemed to me that the colors of these clothes had the same kind of living warmth as the trees and the flowers that bloomed and blossomed in the countryside around them.

A beautiful, incredible dream world . . .

Except it wasn't a dream. Though I didn't know where I was or even *what* I was, I was absolutely sure of one thing: this place I'd suddenly found myself in was completely real.

The word *real* expresses something abstract, and it's frustratingly ineffective at conveying what I'm trying to describe. Imagine being a kid and going to a movie on a summer day. Maybe the movie was good, and you were entertained as you sat through it. But then the show ended, and you filed out of the theater and back into the deep, vibrant, welcoming warmth of the summer afternoon. And as the air and the sunlight hit you, you wondered why on earth you'd wasted this gorgeous day sitting in a dark theater.

Multiply that feeling a thousand times, and you still won't be anywhere close to what it felt like where I was.

I don't know how long, exactly, I flew along. (Time in this place was different from the simple linear time we experience on earth and is as hopelessly difficult to describe as every other aspect of it.) But at some point, I realized that I wasn't alone up there.

Someone was next to me: a beautiful girl with high cheekbones and deep blue eyes. She was wearing the same kind of peasant-like clothes that the people in the village down below wore. Golden-brown tresses framed her lovely face. We were riding along together on an intricately patterned surface, alive with indescribable and vivid colors—the wing of a butterfly. In fact, millions of butterflies were all around us—vast fluttering waves of them, dipping down into the greenery and coming back up around us again. It wasn't any single, discrete butterfly that appeared, but all of them together, as if they were a river of life and color, moving through the air. We flew in lazy looped formations past blossoming flowers and buds on trees that opened as we flew near.

The girl's outfit was simple, but its colors—powder blue, indigo, and pastel orange-peach—had the same overwhelming, super-vivid aliveness that everything else in the surroundings had. She looked at me with a look that, if you saw it for a few moments, would make your whole life up to that point worth living, no matter what had happened in it so far. It was not a romantic look. It was not a look of

friendship. It was a look that was somehow beyond all these . . . beyond all the different types of love we have down here on earth. It was something higher, holding all those other kinds of love within itself while at the same time being more genuine and pure than all of them.

Without using any words, she spoke to me. The message went through me like a wind, and I instantly understood that it was true. I knew so in the same way that I knew that the world around us was real—was not some fantasy, passing and insubstantial.

The message had three parts, and if I had to translate them into earthly language, I'd say they ran something like this:

"You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever."

"You have nothing to fear."

"There is nothing you can do wrong."

The message flooded me with a vast and crazy sensation of relief. It was like being handed the rules to a game I'd been playing all my life without ever fully understanding it.

"We will show you many things here," the girl said—again, without actually using these words but by driving their conceptual essence directly into me. "But eventually, you will go back."

To this, I had only one question.

Back where?

Remember who's talking to you right now. I'm not a soft-headed sentimentalist. I know what death looks like. I know what it feels like to have a living person, whom you spoke to and joked with in better days, become a lifeless object on an operating table after you've struggled for hours to keep the machine of their body working. I know what suffering looks like, and the answerless grief on the faces of loved ones who have lost someone they never dreamed they could lose. I know my biology, and while I'm not a physicist, I'm no slouch at that, either. I know the difference between fantasy and reality, and I know that the experience I'm struggling to give you the vaguest, most completely unsatisfactory picture of, was the single most real experience of my life.

In fact, the only competition for it in the reality department was what came next.

7.

Die Spiraalmelodie en die Poort

Iets verskyn in die donkerte.

Dit draai stadig in die rondte en straal fyn draadjies silwerwit lig uit, en so begin die donkerte om my uitmekaarspat.

Dan hoor ek ’n nuwe geluid: ’n lewende geluid, soos die mooiste en mees komplekse musiek wat jy nog ooit gehoor het. Dit klink al hoe harder, terwyl ’n suiwer wit lig afdaal en die eentonige, meganiese gekap verdryf wat al ’n ewigheid lank, so voel dit, my enigste geselskap was.

Die lig kom al hoe nader en draai al in die rondte terwyl dit draadjies suiwer wit lig uitstraal, met hier en daar ’n goue skynsel.

Toe, in die middelpunt van die lig verskyn iets anders. Ek rig my aandag met alle mag daarop en probeer agterkom wat dit is.

’n Opening. Ek kyk nie meer *na* die stadig draaiende lig nie, maar *deur* dit.

Die oomblik toe ek dit begryp, begin ek opwaarts beweeg. Vinnig. Daar is ’n suisgeluid, en in ’n oogwink gaan ek deur die opening en bevind my in ’n totaal nuwe wêreld. Die vreemdste en mooiste wêreld wat ek nog ooit gesien het.

Helder, skitterend, glansend, skilderagtig, wondermooi, asemrowend … ek kan ’n hele lys byvoeglike naamwoorde opnoem om te beskryf hoe hierdie wêreld gelyk en gevoel het, maar dit sou nie naastenby voldoende wees nie. Ek voel of ek gebore word. Nie hergebore of weer gebore nie. Net … gebore.

Onder my is ’n landskap. Dit is groen, met welige plantegroei, en aards. Dit is die aarde … maar ook nie. Dit is soos wanneer jou ouers jou na ’n plek toe neem waar jy as jong kind ’n paar jaar deurgebring het. Jy ken nie die plek nie. Altans, jy dink jy ken dit nie. Maar terwyl jy rondkyk, is daar iets wat jou trek, en jy besef dat ’n deel van jou, ’n deel wat diep weggebêre is, tog die plek onthou, en bly is om weer daar te wees.

Ek vlieg, bo-oor bome en velde, rivierstrome en watervalle, en hier en daar ook mense. Daar is kinders wat lag en speel. Die mense sing en dans al in die rondte, en soms is daar ’n hond wat tussen hulle hardloop en opspring, net so vol vreugde as die mense. Die klere wat hulle dra, is eenvoudig en kleurvol, kleure wat net so warm en lewend is as die bome en blomme in die omgewing.

’n Pragtige, ongelooflike droomwêreld …

Maar dit is nie ’n droom nie. Hoewel ek nie weet waar ek is of selfs *wat* ek is nie, is ek absoluut seker van een ding: Hierdie plek waar ek my nou bevind, is geheel en al werklik.

Die betekenis van die woord *werklik* is vaag en kom nie naby aan wat ek probeer beskryf nie. Stel jou voor jy is ’n kind en jy gaan fliek op ’n somersdag. Dis miskien ’n goeie rolprent en jy geniet dit terwyl jy kyk. Maar dan is dit verby en jy gaan uit in die gul, warm somermiddag en jy word getref deur die skoon lug en helder sonskyn – en jy wonder waarom het jy hierdie pragtige dag gemors deur in ’n donker teater te sit. Vermenigvuldig daardie gevoel duisend maal, en jy is nog nie naby wat ek daar gevoel het nie.

Ek weet nie hoe lank ek so gevlieg het nie. In hierdie plek is tyd anders as die eenvoudige lineêre tyd wat ons op aarde het en dit is net so moeilik om dit te beskryf as enige ander aspek daarvan. Maar naderhand besef ek dat ek nie alleen is daar bo nie.

Daar is iemand langs my: ’n pragtige meisie met hoë wangbene en diepblou oë. Sy het dieselfde soort eenvoudige boeredrag aan as die mense in die dorpie daar onder. Haar beeldskone gesig word omraam deur goudbruin krulhare. Ons sweef saam op ’n vlak met fyn, kleurvolle patrone, onbeskryflik helder – die vlerk van ’n vlinder. Trouens, daar is nou miljoene vlinders om ons, reuse-groot fladderende golwe wat afduik na die groenigheid daar onder en weer terug na ons toe. Dit is nie ’n enkele, afsonderlike vlinder wat verskyn nie, maar almal bymekaar, soos ’n rivier van lewe en kleur wat deur die lug beweeg. Ons vlieg in lui sirkelformasies, al langs vrugtebome en blomme wat oopgaan wanneer ons verbykom.

Die meisie se kleredrag is eenvoudig, maar die kleure – poeierblou, indigo en bottergeel – is net so helder en skitterend as alles in die omgewing. Sy kyk na my op ’n manier wat, as jy dit net ’n oomblik kon sien, alles wat tot dusver in jou lewe gebeur het die moeite werd

sou maak. Sy kyk nie met romantiese liefde nie. Ook nie met vriendskap nie. Dit is meer as dit alles, meer as al die soorte liefde wat op aarde bestaan. Dit is iets groters, wat al hierdie soorte liefde behels maar meer eg en suiwer is as almal saam.

Sy praat met my sonder om woorde te gebruik. Die boodskap gaan deur my soos 'n wind, en ek weet oombliklik dat dit waar is. Ek weet dit op dieselfde manier dat ek weet dié wêreld waar ek my nou bevind, bestaan werklik – dit is nie 'n vlietende of verbygaande verbeeldingsvlug nie.

Die boodskap het drie dele, en as ek dit in aardse taal moet oordra, sou ek sê dit beteken die volgende:

"Jy word innig liefgehê en gekoester, vir ewig."

"Jy hoef niks te vrees nie."

"Daar is niks wat jy kan verkeerd doen nie."

Die boodskap vervul my met 'n vreemde en oorweldigende gevoel van verligting. Dit is soos om eindelik die reëls te kry vir 'n spel wat ek al jare lank speel sonder dat ek dit ooit mooi verstaan het.

"Ek sal jou baie dinge hier wys," sê die meisie – weer sonder om werklik die woorde te gebruik, maar deur die betekenis direk by my tuis te bring. "Maar uiteindelik sal jy teruggaan."

Hierop het ek net een vraag.

"Terug waarheen?"

Hou in gedagte wie hierdie woorde skryf. Ek is nie 'n onnosele sentimentalis nie. Ek weet hoe lyk die dood. Ek weet hoe dit is wanneer 'n lewende mens, met wie jy vantevore gesels en grappies gemaak het, op 'n operasietafel 'n lewelose voorwerp word, nadat jy ure lank geswoeg het om hulle liggaam aan die gang te hou. Ek weet hoe lyk lyding en die matelose smart op die gesig van naasbestaandes wat nie kan glo hulle het 'n geliefde verloor nie. Ek ken biologie, en selfs fisika, al is dit nie my spesialiteit nie. Ek ken die verskil tussen verbeelding en werklikheid, en ek weet dat die ervaring wat ek nou so sukkel om te beskryf die enkele mees werklike ervaring van my lewe was.

Maar wat volgende gebeur, klink ewe onwerklik.

8.

Israel

By eight the next morning, Holley was back in my room. She spelled Phyllis, taking her place in the chair by the head of my bed and squeezing my still unresponsive hand in hers. Around 11 A.M., Michael Sullivan arrived, and everyone formed a circle around me, with Betsy holding my hand so that I was included, too. Michael led a prayer. They were just finishing when one of the doctors specializing in infectious diseases came in with a fresh report from downstairs. Despite their adjusting my antibiotics overnight, my white blood cell count was still rising. The bacteria were continuing, unimpeded, with the task of eating my brain.

Fast running out of options, the doctors once more went over the details of my activities in the past few days with Holley. Then they stretched their questions to cover the past few weeks. Was there anything—*anything*—in the details of what I'd been doing that could help them make sense of my condition?

"Well," said Holley, "he did take a work trip to Israel a few months ago."

Dr. Brennan looked up from his notepad.

E. coli bacterial cells can swap DNA not only with other *E. coli,* but with other gram-negative bacterial organisms as well. This has enormous implications in our time of global travel, antibiotic bombardment, and fast-mutating new strains of bacterial illnesses. If some *E. coli* bacteria find themselves in a harsh biological environment with some other primitive organisms that are better suited than they are, the *E. coli* can potentially pick up some DNA from those better-suited bacteria and incorporate it.

In 1996, doctors discovered a new bacterial strain harboring DNA for a gene coding for *Klebsiella pneumoniae* carbapenemase, or KPC, an enzyme that conferred antibiotic resistance on its host bacterium. It was found in the stomach of a patient who died in a North Carolina hospital. The strain immediately got the attention of doctors all over the world when it was discovered that KPC could potentially render a bacteria that absorbed it resistant not just to some current antibiotics, but to *all* of them.

If a toxic, antibiotic-proof strain of bacteria (one whose nontoxic cousin is ubiquitous in our bodies) got loose in the general population, it would have a field day with the human race. There are no new antibiotics in the ten-year pharmaceutical development pipeline that could come to the rescue.

Just a few months earlier, Dr. Brennan knew, a patient had checked into a hospital with a powerful bacterial infection and was given a range of powerful antibiotics in an effort to control his *Klebsiella pneumoniae* infection. But the man's condition continued to worsen. Tests revealed that he was still suffering from *Klebsiella pneumoniae* and that the antibiotics hadn't done their work. Further tests revealed that the bacteria living in the man's large intestine had acquired the KPC gene by direct plasmid transfer from his resistant *Klebsiella pneumoniae* infection. In other words, his body had provided the laboratory for the creation of a species of bacteria that, if it got into the general population, might rival the Black Death, a plague that killed off half of Europe in the fourteenth century.

The hospital where all this occurred was the Sourasky Medical Center in Tel Aviv, Israel, and it had occurred just a few months previously. As a matter of fact it happened at about the time that I'd been there, as part of my work coordinating a global research initiative in focused ultrasound brain surgery. I'd arrived in Jerusalem at 3:15 A.M. and after finding my hotel had decided on a whim to walk to the old city. I ended up taking a lone predawn tour of the Via Dolorosa and visiting the alleged site of the Last Supper. The trip had been strangely moving, and once back in the States I'd often brought it up with Holley. But at the time I'd known nothing of the patient at the Sourasky Medical Center, or the bacteria he contracted that picked up the KPC gene. Bacteria that, it developed, was itself a strain of *E. coli.*

Could I have somehow picked up an antibiotic-proof KPC-harboring bacteria while I was over in Israel? It was unlikely. But it was a possible explanation for the apparent resistance of my infection, and my doctors went to work to determine if that was indeed the bacteria that was attacking my brain. My case was about to become, for the first of many reasons, a part of medical history.

8.

Israel

Teen agtuur die volgende oggend is Holley terug langs my bed en gee vir Phyllis 'n blaaskans. Sy hou my hand vas, maar daar is geen reaksie nie. Teen 11 vm sluit Michael Sullivan aan by die groep om my bed. Almal vorm 'n sirkel om my, met Betsy wat my hand vashou en my by die sirkel insluit. Michael doen 'n gebed. Hulle is pas klaar toe een van die spesialiste in aansteeklike siektes binnekom met die jongste laboratoriumverslag. Ondanks aanpassings in die antibiotika gedurende die nag, styg my witbloedseltelling steeds. Die bakterieë se aanslag op my brein duur voort.

Die opsies raak nou min, en die dokters vra Holley weer uit oor my doen en late die afgelope paar dae. Dan oor die afgelope weke. Is daar enigiets – *enigiets* – wat hulle kan help om my toestand te help verklaar?

"Wel," sê Holley, "hy was 'n paar maande gelede op 'n sakereis Israel toe."

Dr Brennan kyk op van sy notaboekie.

E. coli-selle kan RNA nie net met ander *E. coli* uitruil nie, maar ook met ander Gram-negatiewe bakteriële organismes. Dit het geweldige implikasies, as ons die kombinasie van wêreldreise, oormatige gebruik van antibiotika en die voorkoms van snelmuterende bakterieë in ag neem. Indien *E. coli*-bakterieë saam met ander, beter aangepaste primitiewe organismes in 'n onvriendelike biologiese omgewing beland, kan die *E. coli* moontlik van daardie bakterieë RNA oorneem.

In 1996 het dokters 'n nuwe bakteriële stam ontdek wat RNA bevat vir 'n geenkode vir *Klebsiella pneumoniae*-karbapenemase, of KPC, 'n ensiem wat weerstandigheid teen antibiotika aan die gasheer-bakterie oordra. Dit is aangetref in die maag van 'n pasiënt wat in 'n hospitaal in Noord-Carolina oorlede is. Dié stam het onmiddellik wêreldwyd dokters se aandag getrek toe daar vasgestel is dat KPC moontlik 'n gasheer-bakterie weerstandig kon maak teen alle antibiotika wat tans

in gebruik is, nie net sommige nie.

Indien ’n toksiese, weerstandige bakteriële stam onder die algemene publiek versprei, kan dit rampspoedig wees vir die mens. Daar is nie eens antibiotika in die ontwikkelingstadium wat effektief sou wees nie.

Dr Brennan het geweet dat ’n pasiënt net ’n paar maande vantevore by ’n hospitaal toegelaat is met ’n ernstige bakteriële infeksie en ’n reeks sterk antibiotika ontvang het, in ’n poging om sy *Klebsiella pneumoniae*-infeksie te beheer. Die pasiënt se infeksie het egter verder versleg. Laboratoriumondersoeke het aangetoon dat hy nog die infeksie onder lede het en dat die antibiotika dus nie gewerk het nie. Verdere ondersoeke het getoon dat die bakterieë in sy grootderm die geen ontvang het deur middel van direkte plasma-oordrag vanaf sy weerstandige *Klebsiella pneumoniae*-infeksie. Met ander woorde, sy liggaam was die teelaarde vir die ontstaan van ’n bakteriële stam wat, as dit onder die algemene bevolking versprei, dit in omvang erger sou wees as die Swart Dood, ’n builepes-epidemie wat in die veertiende eeu die helfte van die bevolking van Europa uitgewis het.

Die hospitaal waar dit plaasgevind het, was die Sourasky Mediese Sentrum in Tel Aviv, Israel. Dit het net ’n paar maande vantevore gebeur. Trouens, dit het min of meer op dieselfde tyd gebeur wat ek daar op besoek was, as koördineerder van ’n wêreldwye navorsingsprojek in gefokusde ultraklank-breinchirurgie. Ek het om 3:15 vm in Jerusalem aangekom en, nadat ek die hotel gevind het, besluit om na die ou stad te stap. Op die ou einde het ek voor dagbreek ’n lang wandeling langs die Via Dolorosa geneem en die plek besoek waar die Laaste Avondmaal na bewering plaasgevind het. Ek het die besoek nogal aangrypend gevind en het ná my terugkeer na die VSA verskeie male met Holley daaroor gesels. Maar tydens my besoek was ek onbewus van die pasiënt by die Sourasky Mediese Sentrum, of die bakterieë wat hy opgedoen het wat die KPC-geen ontvang het. Bakterieë, soos dit later geblyk het, wat ook ’n *E.Coli*-stam was.

Kon ek op een of ander manier tydens my besoek aan Israel ’n weerstandige KPC-versterkte bakterie opgedoen het? Dit was onwaarskynlik. Maar dit was ’n moontlike verklaring vir die oënskynlike weerstandigheid van my infeksie. Die dokters het verdere

ondersoeke begin doen om vas te stel of dit dié bakterie was wat my brein aanval. My geval sou binnekort om verskeie redes mediese geskiedenis word.

9.

The Core

Meanwhile, I was in a place of clouds.

Big, puffy, pink-white ones that showed up sharply against the deep blue-black sky.

Higher than the clouds—immeasurably higher—flocks of transparent orbs, shimmering beings arced across the sky, leaving long, streamer-like lines behind them.

Birds? Angels? These words registered when I was writing down my recollections. But neither of these words do justice to the beings themselves, which were quite simply different from anything I have known on this planet. They were more advanced. *Higher*.

A sound, huge and booming like a glorious chant, came down from above, and I wondered if the winged beings were producing it. Again thinking about it later, it occurred to me that the joy of these creatures, as they soared along, was such that they *had* to make this noise—that if the joy didn't come out of them this way then they would simply not otherwise be able to contain it. The sound was palpable and almost material, like a rain that you can feel on your skin but that doesn't get you wet.

Seeing and hearing were not separate in this place where I now was. I could *hear* the visual beauty of the silvery bodies of those scintillating beings above, and I could see the surging, joyful perfection of what they sang. It seemed that you could not look at or listen to anything in this world without becoming a part of it—without joining with it in some mysterious way. Again, from my present perspective, I would suggest that you couldn't look *at* anything in that world at all, for the word *at* itself implies a separation that did not exist there. Everything was distinct, yet everything was also a part of everything else, like the rich and intermingled designs on a Persian carpet . . . or a butterfly's wing.

A warm wind blew through, like the kind that spring up on the most perfect summer days, tossing the leaves of the trees and flowing past like heavenly water. A divine breeze. It changed everything, shifting the world around me into an even higher octave, a higher vibration.

Although I still had little language function, at least as we think of it on earth, I began wordlessly putting questions to this wind—and to the divine being that I sensed at work behind or within it.

Where is this place?

Who am I?

Why am I here?

Each time I silently posed one of these questions, the answer came instantly in an explosion of light, color, love, and beauty that blew through me like a crashing wave. What was important about these bursts was that they didn't simply silence my questions by overwhelming them. They *answered* them, but in a way that bypassed language. Thoughts entered me directly. But it wasn't thought like we experience on earth. It wasn't vague, immaterial, or abstract. These thoughts were solid and immediate—hotter than fire and wetter than water—and as I received them I was able to instantly and effortlessly understand concepts that would have taken me years to fully grasp in my earthly life.

I continued moving forward and found myself entering an immense void, completely dark, infinite in size, yet also infinitely comforting. Pitch black as it was, it was also brimming over with light: a light that seemed to come from a brilliant orb that I now sensed near me. An orb that was living and almost solid, as the songs of the angel beings had been.

My situation was, strangely enough, something akin to that of a fetus in a womb. The fetus floats in the womb with the silent partner of the placenta, which nourishes it and mediates its relationship to the everywhere present yet at the same time invisible mother. In this case, the "mother" was God, the Creator, the Source who is responsible for making the universe and all in it. This Being was so close that there seemed to be no distance at all between God and myself. Yet at the same time, I could sense the infinite vastness of the Creator, could see how completely minuscule I was by comparison. I will occasionally use *Om* as the pronoun for God because I originally used that name in my writings after my coma. "Om" was the sound I remembered hearing associated with that omniscient, omnipotent, and unconditionally loving God, but any descriptive word falls short.

The pure vastness separating Om and me was, I realized, why I had the Orb as my companion. In some manner I couldn't completely comprehend but was sure of nonetheless, the Orb was a kind of "interpreter" between me and this extraordinary presence surrounding

me.

It was as if I were being born into a larger world, and the universe itself was like a giant cosmic womb, and the Orb (who remained in some way connected to the Girl on the Butterfly Wing, who in fact *was* she) was guiding me through this process.

Later, when I was back here in the world, I found a quotation by the seventeenth-century Christian poet Henry Vaughan that came close to describing this place—this vast, inky-black core that was the home of the Divine itself.

"There is, some say, in God a deep but dazzling darkness . . ."

That was it, exactly: an inky darkness that was also full to brimming with light.

The questions, and the answers, continued. Though they still didn't come in the form of language as we know it, the "voice" of this Being was warm and—odd as I know this may sound—personal. It understood humans, and it possessed the qualities we possess, only in infinitely greater measure. It knew me deeply and overflowed with qualities that all my life I've always associated with human beings, and human beings alone: warmth, compassion, pathos . . . even irony and humor.

Through the Orb, Om told me that there is not one universe but many—in fact, more than I could conceive—but that love lay at the center of them all. Evil was present in all the other universes as well, but only in the tiniest trace amounts. Evil was necessary because without it free will was impossible, and without free will there could be no growth—no forward movement, no chance for us to become what God longed for us to be. Horrible and all-powerful as evil sometimes seemed to be in a world like ours, in the larger picture love was overwhelmingly dominant, and it would ultimately be triumphant.

I saw the abundance of life throughout the countless universes, including some whose intelligence was advanced far beyond that of humanity. I saw that there are countless higher dimensions, but that the only way to know these dimensions is to enter and experience them directly. They cannot be known, or understood, from lower dimensional space. Cause and effect exist in these higher realms, but outside of our earthly conception of them. The world of time and space in which we move in this terrestrial realm is tightly and intricately meshed within these higher worlds. In other words, these worlds aren't totally apart from us, because all worlds are part of the

same overarching divine Reality. From those higher worlds one could access any time or place in our world.

It will take me the rest of my life, and then some, to unpack what I learned up there. The knowledge given me was not "taught" in the way that a history lesson or math theorem would be. Insights happened directly, rather than needing to be coaxed and absorbed. Knowledge was stored without memorization, instantly and for good. It didn't fade, like ordinary information does, and to this day I still possess all of it, much more clearly than I possess the information that I gained over all of my years in school.

That's not to say that I can get to this knowledge just like that. Because now that I'm back here in the earthly realm, I have to process it through my limited physical body and brain. But it's there. I feel it, laid into my very being. For a person like me who had spent his whole life working hard to accumulate knowledge and understanding the old-fashioned way, the discovery of this more advanced level of learning was, alone, enough to give me food for thought for ages to come . . .

Unfortunately, for my family and my doctors back on earth, the situation was very different.

9.

Die Kern

Intussen is ek in ’n wolkewêreld, met groot, gepofte pienkwit wolke wat helder teen die diep blouswart lug uitstaan.

Hoër as die wolke – onmeetbaar hoër – sweef swerms deurskynende sfere deur die lug en laat lang lintspore agter.

Voëls? Engele? Hierdie woorde het later by my opgekom toe ek my herinneringe neergeskryf het. Maar nie een van die woorde laat reg geskied aan die wesens, wat geheel en al anders was as enige wese wat ek ooit op hierdie planeet teëgekom het nie. Hulle was meer gevorderd, meer *verhewe*.

’n Geluid, ’n grootse dreuning, soos ’n jubelsang, kom van bo af, en ek wonder of die gevleuelde wesens dit voortbring. Toe ek later weer daaroor nadink, het ek besef dat die vreugde van hierdie wesens terwyl hulle so voortsweef so groot was dat hulle hierdie geluid moes maak, dat as die vreugde nie op hierdie manier tot uiting kon kom nie, hulle dit gewoon nie sou kon inhou nie. Die geluid is byna tasbaar, soos reën wat jy teen jou vel kan voel sonder dat jy nat word. Waar ek nou is, is sien en hoor nie afsonderlik van mekaar nie. Ek kan die visuele skoonheid van die silwerige liggame van die skitterende wesens daar bo *hoor*, en ek kan die vreugdevolle perfeksie van die lied *sien*. Dit is asof mens nie na enigiets in hierdie wêreld kan kyk of luister sonder om deel daarvan te word nie – sonder om op ’n geheimsinnige manier daarmee een te word nie.

Terugskouend sou ek sê dat mens nie *na* enigiets in daardie wêreld kon kyk nie, want die woord *na* veronderstel ’n skeiding wat nie daar bestaan het nie. Alles was afsonderlik herkenbaar, maar tog ook deel van die geheel, soos die ryk en ineengeweefde patrone op ’n Persiese mat … of die vlerk van ’n vlinder.

’n Ligte wind ruis verby, die soort wind wat op ’n perfekte somerdag die blare aan die bome laat ritsel en soos hemelse water vloei. ’n Hemelse bries. Dit verander alles, maak dit meer intens – asof klank ’n

oktaaf hoër is en beweging teen ’n hoër versnelling plaasvind.

Hoewel ek nog oor min taalfunksie beskik, altans soos ons op aarde taal verstaan, begin ek om sonder woorde vrae aan hierdie wind te stel – en aan die hemelse wese wat ek vermoed daarbinne of daaragter teenwoordig is.

Waar is ek?

Wie is ek?

Waarom is ek hier?

Elke keer dat ek woordeloos een van hierdie vrae stel, kom die antwoord oombliklik, in ’n opwelling van lig, kleur, liefde en skoonheid wat soos ’n golf oor my breek.

’n Belangrike kenmerk van hierdie antwoorde is dat dit nie bloot my vrae stilmaak deur dit te oorweldig nie. My vrae word beantwoord, maar op ’n manier wat taal onnodig maak. Die gedagtes word direk na my oorgedra, maar dit is nie gedagtes soos dié wat ons op aarde het nie. Dit was nie vaag of abstrak nie. Hierdie gedagtes is solied en onmiddellik en die oomblik dat ek hulle ontvang, is ek in staat om sonder moeite begrippe te verstaan wat in my aardse bestaan jare sou kos om ten volle te begryp.

Ek beweeg steeds vorentoe en kom by ’n onmeetbaar groot leegte, heeltemal donker, oneindig groot, maar ook oneindig gerusstellend. Dit is stikdonker maar tog gevul met lig: ’n lig wat van ’n helder sfeer naby my kom.’n Sfeer wat lewend is en byna solied, soos die lied van die engel-wesens.

Vreemd genoeg, is my situasie baie soos dié van ’n fetus in die baarmoeder. Die fetus dryf in die baarmoeder, saam met die plasenta, die stille metgesel, wat dit voed en as tussenganger na die moeder dien, wat alomteenwoordig is, maar tog onsigbaar. In hierdie geval is die “moeder” God, die Skepper, die Bron wat verantwoordelik is vir die bestaan van die heelal en alles wat daarin is. Hierdie wese is so naby dat dit vir my voel asof daar geen afstand tussen my en God is nie. Terselfdertyd voel ek die oneindige grootheid van die Skepper aan, kan ek sien hoe onbeduidend klein ek in vergelyking is.

Ek sal soms Om gebruik as voornaamwoord vir God omdat ek aan die begin dié naam gebruik het, toe ek ná my koma begin skryf het. “Om” was die geluid wat ek onthou het en geassosieer het met die onvoorwaardelike liefde van die alwetende, almagtige God. Maar

enige beskrywende woorde skiet te kort.

Ek begin besef die oneindige afstand tussen my en Om is die rede waarom ek die Sfeer as metgesel het. Op die een of ander manier wat ek nie heeltemal kan begryp nie, is die Sfeer 'n soort tolk tussen my en hierdie ontsaglike teenwoordigheid om my. Dit is asof ek in 'n groter wêreld gebore word, en die heelal self is soos 'n reuse-, kosmiese baarmoeder. Die Sfeer (wat ook op 'n manier verwant is aan die meisie op die vlindervlerk, wat in werklikheid sy *is*) is my gids deur hierdie proses.

Later, terug in hierdie wêreld, het ek 'n aanhaling deur die sewentiendeeeuse Christen-digter Henry Vaughan gevind, wat 'n goeie beskrywing van hierdie plek was – hierdie groot, pikdonker kern was die tuiste van die Godheid self.

"There is, some say, in God a deep but dazzling darkness …"

Die vrae en antwoorde het voortgeduur. Hoewel dit nog steeds nie in die vorm van taal was soos ons dit ken nie, was die stem van hierdie Wese warm en – vreemd soos dit mag klink – persoonlik. Die Wese verstaan mense, en het dieselfde eienskappe wat ons het, net oneindig meer so. Die Wese ken my diepste wese en beskik in oorvloed oor dié eienskappe wat ek nog altyd met mense geassosieer het, en net met mense: warmte, medelye, patos … en selfs ironie en humor.

Deur die Sfeer het Om my laat verstaan dat daar nie net een heelal is nie, maar baie – trouens, meer as wat ek my kon voorstel – en dat liefde die middelpunt van almal is. Die bose is in elke heelal teenwoordig, maar net die kleinste moontlike hoeveelheid. Die bose is noodsaaklik omdat vrye wil daarsonder onmoontlik is, en sonder vrye wil is daar geen groei nie – geen beweging vorentoe nie, geen kans om te word wat God graag wil hê ons moet wees nie. Al is die bose in ons wêreld soms bedreigend en oorweldigend, in die groter prentjie is liefde almagtig en triomfeer dit uiteindelik.

Ek het gesien daar is oorvloedige lewe in die ontelbare heelalle, waarvan sommige wesens 'n meer gevorderde intelligensie as dié van die mens het. Ek het gesien daar is ontelbaar vele hoër dimensies, maar daar is net een manier om hierdie dimensies te ken – om dit binne te gaan en eerstehands te ervaar. Dit kan nie vanuit 'n laer dimensie in die ruimte geken of verstaan word nie. Oorsaak en gevolg

bestaan in hierdie hoër dimensies, maar buite ons aardse begrip daarvan. Die wêreld van tyd en ruimte waarbinne ons in hierdie aardse bestaan beweeg, is ten nouste met hierdie hoër dimensies verweef. Met ander woorde, hierdie wêrelde is nie heeltemal van ons afgesonder nie, want alle wêrelde is deel van dieselfde oorkoepelende Werklikheid. Vanuit daardie hoër wêrelde kan mens tot enige tyd of plek in ons wêreld toegang kry.

Ek sal die res van my lewe nodig hê, en nog meer, om alles wat ek daar geleer het te verwerk. Die kennis wat ek daar opgedoen het, is nie "geleer" soos mens geskiedenis of wiskunde leer nie. Insigte het direk na my gekom, eerder as om uitgepluis en geabsorbeer te word. Kennis is onmiddellik en permanent gestoor, sonder dat dit gememoriseer moes word. Dit het nie vervaag, soos gewone kennis vervaag nie, en tot vandag toe besit ek dit alles nog steeds, veel duideliker as die kennis wat ek in al my jare op skool en universiteit opgedoen het.

Dit beteken nie dat ek sommer net so toegang tot hierdie kennis kan kry nie. Noudat ek terug is in die aardse bestaan, moet ek hierdie kennis met my beperkte liggaam en brein verwerk. Maar dit is daar. Ek kan dit voel, dis in my diepste wese ingeprent. Vir iemand soos ek, wat my lewe lank hard gewerk het om kennis te versamel en op die ou manier te verstaan, was die ontdekking van hierdie meer gevorderde vlak van kennis alreeds genoeg om my nog jare lank stof tot nadenke te gee.

Ongelukkig was die situasie vir my gesin, familie en dokters hier op aarde heeltemal anders.

10.

What Counts

Holley didn't fail to notice how interested the doctors became when she mentioned my trip to Israel. But of course she didn't understand *why* it was so important. In retrospect, it was a blessing that she didn't. Coping with my possible death was burden enough, without the added possibility that I was the index case for the twenty-first-century equivalent of the Black Plague.

Meanwhile, more calls went out to friends and family.

Including to my biological family.

As a young boy, I'd worshipped my father, who was chief of staff for twenty years at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem. I chose academic neurosurgery as a career in order to follow in his footsteps as closely as I could—despite knowing I'd never completely fill his shoes.

My father was a deeply spiritual man. He served as a surgeon in the Army Air Force in the jungles of New Guinea and the Philippines during World War II. He witnessed brutality and suffering and suffered himself. He told me about nights spent operating on battle casualties in tents that barely held up under the blankets of monsoon rain hitting them, the heat and humidity so oppressive that the surgeons stripped down to their underwear just to be able to endure it.

Dad had married the love of his life (and his commanding officer's daughter), Betty, in October 1942, while training for his stint in the Pacific Theater. At war's end he was part of the initial group of Allied forces occupying Japan after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As the only U.S. military neurosurgeon in Tokyo, he was officially indispensable. He was qualified to perform ear, nose, and throat surgery to boot.

All of these qualifications ensured that he would not be going anywhere for quite some time. His new commanding officer would not allow him to go back to the States until the situation was "more stable." Several months after the Japanese formally surrendered aboard the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, Dad, at last, received general orders releasing him to go home. However, he knew that the on-site CO would have these orders rescinded if he saw them. So Dad

waited until the weekend, when that CO was off base for R&R, and processed the orders through the stand-in CO. He was finally able to board a ship bound for home in December 1945, long after most of his fellow soldiers had returned to their families.

After coming back to the States in early 1946, Dad went on to finish his neurosurgical training with his friend and Harvard Medical School classmate, Donald Matson, who had served in the European Theater. They trained at the Peter Bent Brigham and the Children's Hospitals in Boston (flagship hospitals of Harvard Medical School) under Dr. Franc D. Ingraham, who had been one of the last residents trained by Dr. Harvey Cushing, globally regarded as the father of modern neurosurgery. In the 1950s and 1960s, the entire cadre of "3131C" neurosurgeons (as they were officially classified by the Army Air Force), who had honed their craft on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific, went on to set the bar for the next half century of neurosurgeons, including those in my own generation.

My parents grew up during the Depression and were hardwired for work. Dad just about always made it home for family dinner at 7 P.M., usually in a suit and tie, but occasionally wearing surgical scrubs. Then he'd return to the hospital, often taking one of us kids along to do our homework in his office, while he made rounds on his patients. For Dad, life and work were essentially synonymous, and he raised us accordingly. He usually made my sisters and me do yard work on Sundays. If we told him we wanted to go to the movies, he'd reply: "If you go to the movies, then someone else has to work." He was also fiercely competitive. On the squash court, he considered every game a "battle to the death," and even into his eighties was always in search of fresh opponents, often decades younger.

He was a demanding parent, but also a wonderful one. He treated everyone he met with respect and carried a screwdriver in the pocket of his lab coat to tighten any loose screws he might encounter during his rounds of the hospital. His patients, his fellow physicians, the nurses, and the entire hospital staff loved him. Whether it was operating on patients, helping to advance research, training neurosurgeons (a singular passsion), or editing the journal *Surgical Neurology* (which he did for a number of years), Dad saw his path in life clearly marked out for him. Even after he finally aged out of the operating room at seventy-one, he continued to keep up with the latest developments in the field. After his death in 2004, his long-time partner Dr. David L. Kelly, Jr., wrote, "Dr. Alexander will always be

remembered for his enthusiasm and proficiencies, his perseverance, and attention to detail, his spirit of compassion, honesty, and excellence in all that he did." No great surprise that I, like so many others, worshipped him.

Very early on, so far back I don't even remember when it was, Mom and Dad had told me that I was adopted (or "chosen," as they put it, because, they assured me, they'd known I was their child from the moment they saw me). They were not my biological birth parents, but they loved me dearly, as if I were their own flesh and blood. I grew up knowing that I'd been adopted in April 1954, at the age of four months, and that my biological mother had been sixteen years old—a sophomore in high school—unwed when she gave birth to me in 1953. Her boyfriend, a senior with no immediate prospects for being able to support a child, had agreed to give me up as well, though neither had wanted to. The knowledge of all this came so early that it was simply a part of who I was, as accepted and unquestioned as the jet black color of my hair and the fact that I liked hamburgers and disliked cauliflower. I loved my adoptive parents just as much as I would have if they had been true blood relations, and they clearly felt the same about me.

My older sister, Jean, had also been adopted, but five months after they adopted me, my mother was able to conceive herself. She delivered a baby girl—my sister Betsy—and five years later, Phyllis, our youngest sister, was born. We were full siblings for all intents and purposes. I knew that wherever I had come from, I was their brother and they were my sisters. I grew up in a family that not only loved me but also believed in me and supported my dreams. Including the dream that seized me in high school and never let go till I achieved it: to be a neurosurgeon like my father.

I didn't think about my adoption during my college and medical school years—at least not on the surface. I did reach out to the Children's Home Society of North Carolina several times, inquiring whether or not my mother had any interest in reuniting. But North Carolina had some of the nation's strictest laws to protect the anonymity of adoptees and their birth parents, even if they desperately wanted to reconnect. After my late twenties, I thought about the matter less and less. And once I met Holley and we started our own family, the question drifted ever further away.

Or ever deeper inside.

In 1999, when he was twelve and we were still living in

Massachusetts, Eben IV got involved in a family heritage project at the Charles River School where he was a sixth grader. He knew I'd been adopted, and thus that he had direct relatives on the planet whom he didn't know personally, or even by name. The project sparked something in him—a deep curiosity that he hadn't, up to that point, known he had.

He asked me if we could seek out my birth parents. I told him that over the years I'd occasionally looked into the matter myself, contacting the Children's Home Society of North Carolina and asking if they had any news. If my biological mom or dad desired contact, the society would know. But I had never heard anything back.

Not that it bothered me. "It's perfectly natural in a circumstance like this," I'd told Eben. "It doesn't mean my birth mom doesn't love me, or that she wouldn't love you if she ever set eyes on you. But she doesn't want to, most likely because she feels like you and I have our own family and she doesn't want to get in the way of that."

Eben wouldn't let it go, though, so finally I thought I'd humor him and wrote a social worker named Betty at the Children's Home who'd helped me with my requests before. A few weeks later, on a snowy Friday afternoon in February 2000, Eben IV and I were driving from Boston up to Maine for a weekend of skiing when I remembered I was due to give Betty a call to check on her progress. I called her on my cell phone, and she answered.

"Well, in fact," she said, "I *do* have some news. Are you sitting down?"

I was in fact sitting down, so I said as much, omitting that I was also driving my car through a blizzard.

"It turns out, Dr. Alexander, that your birth parents actually *got married*."

My heart hammered in my chest, and the road in front of me suddenly turned unreal and far away. Though I'd known that my parents were sweethearts, I'd always assumed that once they'd given me up, their lives had taken separate directions. Instantly a picture appeared in my head. A picture of my birth parents, and of a home that they'd made somewhere. A home I had never known. A home where—I didn't belong.

Betty interrupted my thoughts. "Dr. Alexander?"

"Yes," I said slowly, "I'm here."

"There's more."

To Eben's puzzlement, I pulled the car over to the side of the road

and told her to go ahead.

“Your parents had three more children: Two sisters and a brother. I’ve been in touch with the older sister, and she told me your younger sister died two years ago. Your parents are still grieving their loss.”

“So that means . . . ?” I asked after a long pause, still numb, taking it all in without really being able to process any of it.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Alexander, but yes—it means she is refusing your request for contact.”

Eben shifted in the seat behind me, clearly aware that something of importance had just happened but stumped as to what it was.

“What is it, Dad?” he asked after I’d hung up.

“Nothing,” I said. “The agency still doesn’t know much, but they’re working on it. Maybe some time later. Maybe . . .”

But my voice trailed off. Outside, the storm was really picking up. I could only see about a hundred yards into the low white woods spreading out all around us. I put the car in gear, squinted carefully into the rearview mirror, and pulled back onto the road.

In an instant, my view of myself had been totally changed. After that phone call I was, of course, still everything I’d been before: still a scientist, still a doctor, still a father, still a husband. But I also felt, for the first time ever, like an orphan. Someone who had been given away. Someone less than fully, 100 percent wanted.

I had never, before that phone call, really thought of myself that way—as someone cut off from my source. I’d never defined myself in the context of something I had lost and could never regain. But suddenly it was the only thing about myself I could see.

Over the next few months an ocean of sadness opened up within me: a sadness that threatened to swamp, and sink, everything in my life I’d worked so hard to create up to that point.

This was only made worse by my inability to get to the bottom of what was causing the situation. I’d run into problems in myself before—shortcomings, as I’d seen them—and I’d corrected them. In med school and in my early days as a surgeon, for example, I’d been part of a culture where heavy drinking, under the right circumstances, was smiled upon. But in 1991 I began to notice that I was looking forward to my day off, and the drinks that went along with it, just a little too eagerly. I decided that it was time for me to stop drinking alcohol altogether. This was not easy by any stretch—I’d come to rely on the release provided by those off hours more than I’d known—and I only made it through those early days of sobriety with my family’s support.

So here was another problem, clearly with only me to blame for it. I had help to deal with it if I chose to ask. Why couldn't I nip it in the bud? It just didn't seem right that a piece of knowledge about my past —a piece I had no control over whatsoever—should be able to so completely derail me both emotionally and professionally.

So I struggled. And I watched in disbelief as my roles as doctor, father, and husband became ever more difficult to fulfill. Seeing that I was not my best self, Holley set us up for a course of couples counseling. Though she only partially understood what was causing it, she forgave me for falling into this ditch of despair and did whatever she could to pull me up out of it. My depression had ramifications in my work. My parents were, of course, aware of this change, and though I knew they too forgave it, it killed me that my career in academic neurosurgery was slumping—and all they could do was watch from the sidelines. Without my participation, my family was powerless to help me.

And finally, I watched as this new sadness exposed, then swept away, something else: my last, half-acknowledged hope that there was some personal element in the universe—some force beyond the scientific ones I'd spent years studying. In less clinical terms, it swept away my last belief that there might be a Being of some kind out there who truly loved and cared about me—and that my prayers might be heard, and even answered. After that phone call during the blizzard, the notion of a loving, personal God—my birthright, to some degree, as a churchgoing member of a culture that took that God with genuine seriousness—vanished completely.

Was there a force or intelligence watching out for all of us? Who cared about humans in a truly loving way? It was a surprise to have to finally admit that in spite of all my medical training and experience, I was clearly still keenly, if secretly, interested in this question, just as I'd been much more interested in the question of my birth parents than I'd ever realized.

Unfortunately, the answer to the question of whether there was such a Being was the same as the answer to the question of whether my birth parents would once again open their lives and their hearts to me.

That answer was no.

10.

Wat Regtig Saak Maak

Holley kom agter dat die dokters met groot aandag luister toe sy van my sakereis na Israel vertel. Maar sy weet natuurlik nie waarom dit so belangrik is nie. Dit is ook maar goed – dit is vir haar erg genoeg om te weet dat ek op die randjie van die dood is, sonder dat sy haar verder sou moes bekommer oor die moontlikheid dat ek die eerste geval kon wees van 'n epidemie wat die hedendaagse ekwivalent van die Swart Dood sou wees.

Intussen word oproepe na familie en vriende gemaak.

Ook na my biologiese familie.

As kind het ek my pa aanbid. Hy was twintig jaar lank superintendent by Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem. Ek het akademiese neurochirurgie as loopbaan gekies omdat ek graag in sy voetspore wou volg – al het ek geweet ek sou nooit sy plek kon volstaan nie.

My pa was 'n diep gelowige man. Gedurende die Tweede Wêreldoorlog het hy in die Amerikaanse lugmag as chirurg gedien. Hy was in die oerwoude van Nieu-Guinee en die Filippyne gestasioneer, waar hy getuie was van groot wreedheid en lyding en ook self gely het. Hy het my vertel hoe hy nagte deur op beseerde soldate geopereer het, in tente wat skaars beskerming kon bied teen die swiepende moesonreëns, en hitte en humiditeit wat so erg was dat die chirurge in hulle onderklere staan en opereer het.

Tydens sy opleiding vir militêre diens in die Stille Oseaan-gebied is hy in Oktober 1942 met sy geliefde Betty getroud (wat ook sy bevelvoerder se dogter was). Aan die einde van die oorlog, ná die atoombomaanval op Hirosjima en Nagasaki, was hy deel van die groep Geallieerde Magte wat Japan beset het. As die enigste Amerikaanse militêre neurochirurg in Tokio was hy amptelik onmisbaar. Daarby was hy gekwalifiseer in oor-neus-en-keelchirurgie.

Al hierdie kwalifikasies het beteken dat sy dienste daar nodig was.

Sy nuwe bevelvoerder wou hom nie toelaat om terug te keer na die VSA totdat die situasie "meer stabiel" was nie. 'n Paar maande nadat Japan formeel in Tokiobaai, aan boord van die *Missouri* oorgegee het, het Pa uiteindelik die algemene bevel gekry dat hy kan huis toe gaan. Hy het egter geweet die plaaslike bevelvoerder sou die bevel laat terugtrek as hy dit onder oë kry. Hy wag toe totdat die betrokke bevelvoerder die naweek van diens is vir rus en herstel, en vra die instaan-bevelvoerder om die bevel te prosesseer. Hy kon uiteindelik in Desember 1945 'n boot haal huis toe, lank nadat die meeste van sy medesoldate al met hulle gesinne herenig is.

By sy terugkeer na die VSA vroeg in 1946 het Pa sy neurochirurgiese opleiding saam met sy vriend Donald Matson voltooi. Donald het saam met hom by Harvard gestudeer en het aan die Europese front gedien. Hulle het in Boston by die Peter Bent Brigham Hospital en die Children's Hospital (vlagskiphospitale verbonde aan Harvard se mediese fakulteit) onder dr Franc D. Ingraham studeer. Hy was op sy beurt een van die laaste kliniese assistente wat onder dr Harvey Cushing studeer het, wat wêreldwyd as die vader van moderne neurochirurgie beskou word. In die vyftiger- en sestigerjare het die hele groep "3131C"-neurochirurge (soos hulle amptelik deur die Amerikaanse lugmag benoem is), wat hulle ondervinding op die slagvelde van Europa en Oos-Asië opgedoen het, die standaard gestel vir neurochirurge in die daaropvolgende vyftig jaar, insluitend dié van my generasie.

My ouers het in die Depressiejare grootgeword en was gewoond aan harde werk. Pa was gewoonlik net betyds vir aandete saam met die gesin om 7 nm, gewoonlik met sy pak en das aan, maar soms nog in sy teaterdrag. Dan het hy teruggegaan hospitaal toe vir saalrondes. Ons kinders het dikwels 'n beurt gekry om saam te gaan en kon dan in sy kantoor huiswerk doen terwyl hy besig was. Vir Pa was lewe en werk een ding, en hy het ons so grootgemaak. Ek en my susters moes gewoonlik Saterdae in die tuin werk. As ons wou gaan fliek, het hy gesê, "Dan moet iemand anders die werk doen." Hy het ook 'n sterk mededingende streep gehad. Op die muurbalbaan was elke spel 'n "stryd tot die dood" en selfs in sy tagtigs was hy steeds op soek na nuwe teenstanders, soms dekades jonger as hy.

Hy was 'n veeleisende maar wonderlike ouer. Hy het almal met

respek behandel – sy pasiënte en kollegas, die verpleegsters en hospitaalpersoneel was almal lief vir hom. Hy het 'n skroewedraaier in sy wit jas se sak saamgedra om los skroewe vas te draai wat hy op sy saalrondes teëgekom het! Sy lewenstaak was vir hom duidelik gedefinieer: operasies op pasiënte, bevordering van navorsing, opleiding van neurochirurge (sy groot passie) en die redigering van die tydskrif *Surgical Neurology* (waarvan hy 'n aantal jare redakteur was). Selfs nadat hy op een-en-sewentig nie meer kon opereer nie, het hy op hoogte gebly van die nuutste ontwikkelings op die gebied. Ná sy dood in 2004 het sy vennoot van baie jare, dr David L. Kelly Jr, aan hom hulde gebring en gesê dat hy altyd onthou sou word vir sy geesdrif en deskundigheid, sy volharding en nougesette aandag aan detail, sy barmhartigheid, eerlikheid en uitnemendheid in alles wat hy aangepak het. Geen wonder dat ek, soos baie ander, hom aanbid het nie.

Vroeg reeds, so lank terug dat ek nie eens kan onthou presies wanneer dit was nie, het my ouers vir my vertel dat ek aangeneem is (of "gekies", soos hulle dit gestel het, want, het hulle my verseker, hulle het geweet ek was hulle kind van die oomblik dat hulle my gesien het). Hulle was nie my biologiese ouers nie, maar hulle het my innig liefgehad, asof ek hulle vlees en bloed was. Ek het grootgeword in die wete dat ek in April 1954 aangeneem is, op die ouderdom van vier maande, en dat my biologiese ma sestien jaar oud was – 'n junior in die hoërskool – toe ek in 1953 gebore is. Haar kêrel, 'n senior op hoërskool met geen vooruitsigte om 'n kind te kan onderhou nie, het ingestem dat ek vir aanneming gegee word, hoewel nie een van hulle dit graag wou doen nie. Hierdie wete het so vroeg al by my posgevat dat dit eenvoudig 'n deel was van wie ek was. Ek het dit vanselfsprekend aanvaar, net soos die feit dat ek pikswart hare gehad het en van hamburgers gehou het en nie van blomkool nie. Ek was lief vir my aanneemouers, asof hulle my eie bloedfamilie was, en hulle het net so gevoel oor my.

My ouer suster, Jean, is ook aangeneem, maar vyf maande nadat hulle my aangeneem het, het my ma swanger geraak. My suster Betsy is gebore, en vyf jaar later Phyllis, ons jongste suster. Ons was almal op gelyke voet in die gesin. Ek het geweet dat waar ek ook al vandaan kom, ek hulle broer is en hulle my susters. Ek het in 'n gesin

grootgeword wat my nie net liefgehad het nie, maar in my geglo het en my ondersteun het om my drome te bewaarheid. Veral die droom wat ek sedert my hoërskooljare gehad het en wat ek nagestreef het totdat ek dit bereik het: om ’n neurochirurg te word, soos my pa.

Gedurende my universiteitsjare het ek nie aan my aanneming gedink nie – altans nie bewustelik nie. Ek het wel ’n paar keer by die Children’s Home Society van Noord-Carolina navraag gedoen of my biologiese ma daarin sou belangstel om kontak te maak. Maar Noord-Carolina het van die strengste wette in die land om die anonimiteit van aangenome kinders en hulle biologiese ouers te beskerm, selfs al wou hulle graag herenig. In my laat twintigs het ek al hoe minder daaraan gedink en nadat ek Holley ontmoet het en ons met ons eie gesin begin het, het die kwessie nog meer op die agtergrond vervaag.

Of nog dieper in my binneste.

In 1999, toe hy twaalf was en ons nog in Massachusetts gewoon het, het ’n Eben IV by Charles River School waar hy in graad ses was ’n familiestamboomprojek aangepak. Hy het geweet dat ek aangeneem is en dat hy dus direkte verwante het het wat hy glad nie ken nie, nie eens hulle name nie. Die projek het iets in hom wakker gemaak – ’n nuuskierigheid wat hy nooit tevore gehad het nie.

Hy het my gevra of ons my biologiese ouers kon probeer opspoor. Ek het vertel dat ek al by geleentheid probeer het en by die Children’s Home Society navraag gedoen het. As my biologiese ma of pa wou kontak maak, sou die agentskap geweet het. Maar ek het nooit iets van hulle gehoor nie.

Dit het my nie gepla nie. “Dis heeltemal verstaanbaar in die omstandighede,” het ek vir Eben gesê. “Dit beteken nie dat my geboortema nie lief is vir my nie, of dat sy nie sou lief wees vir jou as sy jou ooit sou ontmoet nie. Maar waarskynlik wil sy nie, omdat sy voel dat ons nou ons eie familie het en dat sy nie tussenin wil kom nie.”

Eben wou nie bes gee nie, daarom het ek aan Betty geskryf, ’n maatskaplike werker by die Children’s Home Society wat voorheen my navrae gehanteer het. ’n Paar weke later, op ’n wintersmiddag in Februarie 2000, ry ek en Eben IV vir die naweek van Boston af Maine toe om te gaan ski. Ek onthou dat ek nog vir Betty moes bel om te hoor of daar vordering was. Ek bel haar op my selfoon, en sy

antwoord.

“Om die waarheid te sê, ek het nuus,” sê sy. “Is u gereed daarvoor? Miskien moet u gaan sit.”

Ek antwoord dat ek sit, hoewel ek nie byvoeg dat ek besig is om in ’n sneeustorm te bestuur nie.

“Dr Alexander, dit blyk dat u biologiese ouers wel later getroud is.”

My hart klop in my keel en die pad voor lyk skielik vaag en onwerklik. Hoewel ek geweet het my ouers was verlief, het ek altyd aanvaar dat hulle paadjies geskei het nadat hulle my vir aanneming gegee het. Skielik het ’n prentjie in my gedagtes verskyn. ’n Prentjie van my biologiese ouers, en ’n tuiste wat hulle iewers gemaak het. ’n Tuiste wat ek nooit geken het nie. ’n Tuiste waar ek nie gehoort het nie.

Ek hoor Betty se stem. “Dr Alexander?”

“Ja,” sê ek stadig, “ek is hier.”

“Dis nie al nie.”

Tot Eben se verbasing hou ek langs die pad stil en sê sy moet voortgaan.

“Jou ouers het nog drie kinders gehad: Twee susters en ’n broer. Ek het met die ouer suster gepraat en sy het vertel dat jou jonger suster twee jaar gelede oorlede is. Jou ouers treur nog oor haar.”

“So dit beteken …?” vra ek na ’n lang stilte, nog nie in staat om dit alles verwerk nie.

“Ek is jammer, dr Alexander, maar, ja – dit beteken sy weier u versoek om kontak te maak.”

Eben skuif langs my in sy sitplek rond, bewus dat daar iets van groot belang gebeur het, maar onseker oor wat dit kan wees.

“Wat het gebeur, Pappa?” vra hy nadat ek afgelui het.

“Niks,” sê ek. “Die agentskap weet nog nie veel nie, hulle probeer nog uitvind. Miskien later. Miskien …”

Maar ek praat nie verder nie. Buite raak die storm erger. Ek kan net sowat ’n honderd treë ver in die bosse langs die pad sien. Ek sit die motor in rat, kyk in die truspieëltjie en trek weg.

Binne ’n paar oomblikke het my beeld van myself geheel en al verander. Ná daardie oproep was ek natuurlik nog steeds die mens wat ek voorheen was: nog steeds ’n wetenskaplike, nog steeds ’n dokter, nog steeds ’n vader, nog steeds ’n eggenoot. Maar ek het ook,

die eerste keer ooit, soos ’n weeskind gevoel. Iemand wat weggegee is. Iemand wat nie werklik 100% gewens was nie.

Ek het nooit voor daardie oproep so aan myself gedink nie – as iemand wat van sy oorsprong afgesny is nie. Ek het myself nooit gesien as iemand wat iets verloor het wat ek nooit sal kan terugvind nie. Maar skielik was dit al wat ek kon sien.

Gedurende die daaropvolgende paar maande het ’n wolk van neerslagtigheid op my toegesak: ’n neerslagtigheid wat gedreig het om my hele lewe te verswelg, alles waaraan ek tot op daardie punt so hard gewerk het.

Wat dit nog erger gemaak het, was my onvermoë om te verstaan waarom ek so voel. Ek het in die verlede persoonlike probleme gehad – tekortkominge, soos ek dit beskou het – en ek het dit reggestel. As mediese student en jong dokter was ek byvoorbeeld deel van ’n kultuur waar oormatige drankgebruik in sekere omstandighede aanvaarbaar was. Maar in 1991 het ek begin agterkom dat ek dalk net ’n bietjie te veel uitsien na my dag af, en die drankies wat daarmee saamgaan. Ek het besluit dat ek heeltemal moet ophou om alkohol te gebruik. Dit was glad nie maklik nie – ek het, meer as wat ek besef het, afhanklik geraak van die ontvlugting wat daardie aftye gebied het . Met my familie se ondersteuning kon ek egter die eerste moeilike periode van alkoholonthouding deursien. Maar hier was nou ’n nuwe probleem wat ek nie kon afskud nie. Daar was hulp beskikbaar, as ek wou vra. Waarom kon ek die probleem nie onderkry nie? Dit was net nie reg dat ’n brokkie inligting uit my verlede – iets waaroor ek geen beheer gehad het nie – my professionele en persoonlike lewe so kon omver gooi nie.

Ek het maar op my eie probeer regkom. En ek kon nie verstaan waarom dit al hoe moeiliker geraak het om my rolle as dokter, vader en eggenoot te vervul nie. Holley het agtergekom dat daar iets fout is, en ons ingeskryf vir ’n beradingskursus vir egpare. Hoewel sy nie heeltemal kon verstaan wat die oorsaak was nie, het sy my nie kwalik geneem dat ek in hierdie donker put vasgeval het nie en alles probeer om my daaruit te probeer kry. My depressie het my werk geaffekteer. My ouers het natuurlik ook geweet iets is fout, en hoewel ek geweet het dat hulle my nie blameer nie, was dit vir my ’n groot verleentheid dat my loopbaan in akademiese neurochirurgie op die afdraand was –

en hulle kon maar net toesien hoe dit gebeur.

Uiteindelik het ek agtergekom dat my neerslagtigheid iets anders blootgelê het – en uiteindelik vernietig het: my laaste, halfbewuste hoop dat daar een of ander persoonlike teenwoordigheid in die heelal is – 'n krag wat groter is as die wetenskaplike kragte wat ek so lank bestudeer het. Anders gestel, my laaste greintjie geloof dat daar tog een of ander Wese is wat my werklik liefhet en vir my omgee – en dat my gebede verhoor word, en selfs beantwoord word – is weggevee. Na daardie telefoongesprek in die sneeustorm het die idee van 'n liefdevolle, persoonlike God –wat tog my geboortereg was as 'n kerkganger en lid van 'n kultuur wat God waarlik ernstig opneem – finaal verdwyn.

Is daar 'n krag of intelligensie wat oor ons elkeen waak? Wie gee regtig uit liefde om oor die mens? Dit het vir my as 'n verrassing gekom dat ek, ondanks my mediese opleiding en ervaring, nog steeds intens met hierdie vraag gemoeid was, net soos ek veel intenser met die vraag oor my biologiese ouers gemoeid was as wat ek ooit besef het.

Ongelukkig was die antwoord op die vraag of daar so 'n Wese is, dieselfde as die antwoord op die vraag of my biologiese ouers weer hulle lewens en harte vir my sou oopmaak.

Die antwoord was nee.

11.

An End to the Downward Spiral

For much of the next seven years my career, and my family life, continued to suffer. For a long time the people around me—even those closest to me—weren't sure what was causing the problem. But gradually—through remarks I'd make almost in passing—Holley and my sisters put the pieces together.

Finally, on an early morning walk on a South Carolina beach during a family vacation in July 2007, Betsy and Phyllis brought up the topic. "Have you thought about writing another letter to your birth family?" Phyllis asked.

"Yes," Betsy said. "Things might have changed by now, you never know." Betsy had recently told us she was thinking of adopting a child herself, so I wasn't totally surprised that the topic had come up. But all the same, my immediate response—mental rather than verbal—was: *Oh no, not again!* I remembered the immense chasm that had cracked open beneath me after the rejection I'd faced seven years earlier. But I knew Betsy and Phyllis's hearts were in the right place. They knew I was suffering, they'd finally figured out why, and they wanted—rightly—for me to step up and try to fix the problem. They assured me that they would travel this road with me—that I wouldn't be taking this journey alone, as I had done before. We were a team.

So in early August 2007, I wrote an anonymous letter to my birth sister, the keeper of the gate on the matter, and sent it to Betty at the Children's Home Society of North Carolina to forward along:

> *Dear Sister,*
>
> *I am interested in communicating with you, our brother and our parents. After a long talk with my adoptive family sisters and mother about this, their support and interest rekindled my wanting to know more about my biological family.*
>
> *My two sons, ages 9 and 19, are interested in their heritage. The three of us and my wife would be grateful to you for any background information that you feel comfortable sharing. For me, questions come to mind about my birth parents regarding their lives in their younger years until now. What interests and personalities do you all*

have?

In that we are all growing older, my hopes are to meet them soon. Our arrangements can be in mutual agreement. Please know that I feel most respectful of the degree of privacy that they wish to maintain. I have had a wonderful adoptive family and appreciate my biological parents' decision in their youth. My interest is genuine and receptive to any boundaries they feel are necessary.

Your consideration in this matter is deeply appreciated.

Most sincerely yours,
Your older Brother

A few weeks later I received a letter from the Children's Home Society. It was from my birth sister.

"Yes, we would love to meet you," she wrote. North Carolina state law forbade her from revealing any identifying information to me, but working around those parameters, she gave me my first real set of clues about the biological family I had never met.

When she reported that my birth father had been a naval aviator in Vietnam, it just blew me away: no wonder I had always loved to jump out of airplanes and fly sailplanes. My birth dad was also, I was further stunned to learn, an astronaut trainee with NASA during the Apollo missions in the mid-1960s (I myself had considered training as a mission specialist on the space shuttle in 1983). My birth dad later worked as an airline pilot for Pan Am and Delta.

In October 2007, I finally met my biological parents, Ann and Richard, and my biological siblings, Kathy and David. Ann told me the full story of how, in 1953, she spent three months at the Florence Crittenden Home for Unwed Mothers, located next to Charlotte Memorial Hospital. All of the girls there had code names, and because she loved American history, my mother chose Virginia Dare—the name of the first baby born to English settlers in the New World. Most of the girls just called her Dare. At sixteen, she was the youngest girl there.

She told me that her daddy had been willing to do anything to help her when he learned of her "predicament." He was willing to pick up and move the whole family if necessary. He had been unemployed for a while, and bringing a new baby into the home would be a great financial stress, not to mention all the other problems.

A close friend of his had even mentioned a doctor he knew of down in Dillon, South Carolina, who could "fix things." But her mother

wouldn't hear of *that.*

Ann told me how she had looked up at the stars twinkling wildly in the gusty winds of a newly arrived cold front on that frigid December night in 1953—how she had walked across the empty streets under scattered low, racing clouds. She had wanted this time to be alone, with just the moon and stars and her soon-to-be-born child—me.

"The crescent moon hung low in the west. Brilliant Jupiter was just rising, to watch over us all night. Richard loved science and astronomy, and he later told me that Jupiter was at opposition that night, and would not be as bright again for almost nine years. Over that time, much would happen in our lives, including the births of two more children.

"But at the time I just thought how beautiful and bright the King of Planets appeared, watching over us from above."

As she entered the hospital foyer, a magical thought struck her. Girls generally stayed in the Crittenden Home for two weeks after they delivered their babies, then they'd go home and pick up their lives where they'd left off. If she really delivered that night, she and I might be home for Christmas—if they actually set her free at two weeks. What a perfect miracle that would be: to bring me home by Christmas Day.

"Dr. Crawford was fresh from another delivery, and he looked awfully tired," Ann told me. He laid an ether-soaked gauze over her face to ease the pain, so she was only semiconscious when finally, at 2:42 A.M., with one last great push, she gave birth to her first child.

Ann told me that she wanted so much to hold and caress me, and that she would never forget hearing my cries until fatigue and that anesthetic finally won out.

Over the next four hours, first Mars, then Saturn, then Mercury, and finally brilliant Venus rose in the eastern sky to greet me into this world. Meanwhile, Ann slept more deeply than she had in months.

The nurse awakened her before sunrise.

"I have someone I want you to meet," she said cheerfully, and presented me, swaddled in a sky-blue blanket, for her to admire.

"The nurses all agreed that you were the most beautiful baby in the whole nursery. I was bursting with pride."

As much as Ann wanted to keep me, the cold reality that she couldn't soon sank in. Richard had dreams of going to college, but those dreams would not keep me fed. Perhaps I felt Ann's pain, because I stopped eating. At eleven days, I was hospitalized with the

diagnosis that I was "failing to thrive," and my first Christmas and the following nine days were spent in the hospital in Charlotte.

After I was admitted to the hospital, Ann took the two-hour bus ride north to her small hometown. She spent that Christmas with her parents, sisters, and friends, whom she had not seen in three months. All without me.

By the time I was eating again, my separate life was under way. Ann sensed that she was losing control and that they weren't going to allow her to keep me. When she called the hospital just after New Year's, she was told that I had been sent to the Children's Home Society in Greensboro.

"Sent with a volunteer? How unfair!" she said.

I spent the next three months living in a baby dorm with several other infants whose mothers could not keep them. My crib was on the second floor of a bluish gray Victorian home that had been donated to the society. "It was a most pleasant place for your first home," Ann told me with a laugh, "even though it was mainly a baby dorm." Ann took the three-hour bus ride to visit half a dozen times over the next few months, trying desperately to come up with a plan that would succeed in keeping me with her. Once she came with her mother and another time with Richard (although the nurses made him view me through the window—they would not let him in the same room, and certainly not let him hold me).

But by late March 1954, it was clear that things weren't going to go her way. She would have to give me up. She and her mother took the bus to Greensboro one last time.

"I had to hold you and look in your eyes and try to explain it all to you," Ann told me. "I knew you would just giggle and coo, blow baby bubbles, and make pleasing sounds no matter what I said, but I felt I owed you an explanation. I held you closely one last time, kissed your ears, chest, and face, and caressed you gently. I remember inhaling deeply, loving that wonderful aroma of freshly bathed baby, as if it were yesterday.

"I called you by your birth name and said, 'I love you so much, so much you'll never know. And I'll love you forever, until the day I die.'

"I said, 'God, please let him know how much he is loved. That I love him, and always will.' But I had no way of knowing if my prayer would be answered. Adoption arrangements in the 1950s were final and very secret. No turning back, no explanations. Sometimes birth dates were changed in the records just to hamper anyone's efforts to

uncover the truth about a baby's origins. Leave nothing to trace. Agreements were protected by harsh state laws. The rule was to forget it ever happened and go on with the rest of your life. And, hopefully, learn from it.

"I kissed you one last time, then laid you gently in your crib. I wrapped you in your little blue blanket, took one last look into your blue eyes, then kissed my finger and touched it to your forehead.

"'Goodbye, Richard Michael. I love you,' were my last words to you, at least for half a century or so."

Ann went on to tell me that after she and Richard were married and the rest of their children came along, she became more and more taken up with finding out what had become of me. In addition to being a naval aviator and an airline pilot, Richard was an attorney, and Ann figured that gave him license to uncover my adoptive identity. But Richard was too much of a gentleman to go back on the adoption agreement made in 1954, and he kept out of the matter. In the early 1970s, with the war in Vietnam still raging, Ann couldn't get the date of my birth out of her head. I would turn nineteen in December 1972. Would I go over? If so, what would become of me there? Early on, my plan was to enlist in the marines to fly. My vision was 20/100, and the Air Force required 20/20 without correction. Word on the street was that the marines would take even those of us with 20/100 vision and teach us to fly. However, they then started winding down the Vietnam war effort, so I never enlisted. I headed off to med school instead. But Ann knew none of this. In the spring of 1973, they watched as surviving POWs from the "Hanoi Hilton" disembarked from the planes returning from North Vietnam. They were heartbroken when missing pilots they knew, more than half of Richard's navy class, failed to emerge from the planes, and Ann got it in her head that I might have been killed over there myself.

Once in her mind the image refused to fade, and for years she was convinced that I'd died a grisly death in the rice paddies of Vietnam. She certainly would have been surprised to know that at that time I was just a few miles away from her in Chapel Hill!

In the summer of 2008, I met up with my biological father, his brother Bob, and his brother-in-law, also named Bob, at Litchfield Beach, South Carolina. Brother Bob was a decorated hero in the navy during the Korean War and a test pilot at China Lake (the navy's weapons test center in the California desert, where he perfected the Sidewinder missile system and flew F-104 Starfighters). Meanwhile

Richard's brother-in-law Bob set a speed record during Operation Sun Run in 1957, a circumglobal relay record in F-101 Voodoo jet fighters "outflying the sun" by circling the earth at an average speed of over 1,000 miles per hour.

It felt like Old Home Week for me.

Those meetings with my birth parents heralded the end of what I've come to think of as my Years of Not Knowing. Years that, I came at last to learn, had been characterized by the same terrible pain for my birthparents as they had been for me.

There was only one wound that wouldn't heal: the loss, ten years earlier in 1998, of my biological sister Betsy (yes, the same name as one of the sisters in my adoptive family, and they both married Robs, but that's another story). She'd had a big heart, everyone told me, and, when not working at the rape crisis center where she spent most of her time, she could usually be found feeding and caring for a menagerie of stray dogs and cats. "A real angel," Ann called her. Kathy promised to send me a picture of her. Betsy had struggled with alcohol just as I had, and learning of her loss, fueled in part by those struggles, made me realize once again how fortunate I had been in resolving my own problem. I longed to meet Betsy, to comfort her—to tell her that wounds could heal, and that all would be okay.

Because, strangely enough, meeting my birth family was the first time in my life that I felt that things really *were,* somehow, okay. Family mattered, and I'd gotten mine—most of mine—back. This was my first real education in how profoundly knowledge of one's origins can heal a person's life in unexpected ways. Knowing where I came from, my biological origins, allowed me to see, and to accept, things in myself that I'd never dreamed I'd have been able to. Through meeting them, I was allowed to throw away, at last, the nagging suspicion that I'd carried around without even being aware of it: a suspicion that, wherever I *had* come from, biologically speaking, I had not been loved or cared about. Subconsciously, I had believed that I *didn't deserve* to be loved, or even to exist. Discovering that I had been loved, since the very beginning, began to heal me in the most profound way imaginable. I felt a wholeness I had never known before.

It was not, however, the only discovery in this area that I would make. The other question that I thought had been answered in the car with Eben that day—the question of whether there really is a loving God out there—still held, and the answer in my mind was still no.

It wasn’t until I spent seven days in coma that I revisited that question. I discovered an entirely unexpected answer there as well . . .

11.

Die Donker Wolk Verdwyn

Die volgende sewe jaar het my loopbaan en gesinslewe steeds onder my neerslagtigheid gely. Aanvanklik het selfs die mense naaste aan my nie geweet wat die oorsaak van die probleem was nie. Maar geleidelik – op grond van terloopse opmerkings wat ek gemaak het – het Holley en my susters die stukkies van die legkaart bymekaargesit.

Uiteindelik, een oggend tydens ’n familievakansie in Suid-Carolina, terwyl ons langs die see stap, roer Betsy en Phyllis die onderwerp aan. “Het jy dit al oorweeg om weer aan jou geboorteouers te skryf?” vra Phyllis.

“Ja,” sê Betsy. “Dinge het miskien intussen verander, mens weet nooit.” Betsy het kort vantevore genoem dat sy dit oorweeg om self ’n kind aan te neem, dus was ek nie verbaas dat die onderwerp ter sprake gekom het nie. Maar tog, my eerste reaksie – hoewel ek dit nie hardop uitgespreek het nie – was *Ag nee, nie al weer nie!* Ek het gedink aan die afgrond wat voor my oopgegaan het ná die verwerping wat ek die vorige keer ervaar het. Maar ek het geweet Betsy en Phyllis het dit goed bedoel. Hulle het geweet ek kry swaar en het eindelik vasgestel wat die oorsaak was, en hulle wou hê – ten regte – dat ek die probleem moet aanpak en probeer regstel. Hulle het my verseker dat hulle die pad saam met my sou loop – dat ek dit nie alleen sou moes hanteer, soos die vorige keer nie. Ons was ’n span.

Vroeg in Augustus 2007 skryf ek toe ’n anonieme brief aan my biologiese suster, die hekwagter oor hierdie saak, en pos dit aan Betty by die Children’s Home Society in Noord-Carolina, om aan te stuur.

Liewe Suster

Ek wil graag met jou, ons broer en ons ouers kommunikeer. Ná ’n lang gesprek met my aangenome susters en moeder, het hulle ondersteuning en aansporing my begeerte om meer oor my geboortefamilie te wete te kom weer aangewakker.

My twee seuns, wat nou 9 en 19 jaar oud is, wil graag meer oor hulle afkoms weet. Ons drie en my vrou sal graag enige agtergrondinligting wat julle bereid is om met ons te deel verwelkom. Ek sou graag meer wil weet oor my ouers se lewe, van hulle jonger jare tot nou. Wat is julle belangstellings en persoonlikhede?

Ons word almal ouer en ek hoop om hulle binnekort te kan ontmoet. So ’n ontmoeting moet

natuurlik met wedersydse instemming plaasvind. Wees verseker dat ek hulle privaatheid respekteer. Ek het 'n wonderlike aanneemfamilie en ek verstaan my geboorteouers se besluit in hulle jeug. My belangstelling is opreg en ek respekteer enige voorwaardes wat hulle sou wou stel.

Jou oorweging aan hierdie saak word opreg waardeer.

Met hartlike groete,

Jou ouer Broer

'n Paar weke later ontvang ek 'n brief van die Children's Home Society. Dit kom van my biologiese suster.

"Ja, ons wil jou baie graag ontmoet," skryf sy. Die aanneemwet van Noord-Carolina het haar verbied om enige identifikasie te verstrek, maar sy het soveel inligting as moontlik gegee oor die familie wat ek nooit geken het nie.

Haar nuus dat my biologiese pa as vlieënier in Viëtnam gedien het, het my stomgeslaan: geen wonder dat ek so graag uit vliegtuie gespring het en in sweeftuie gevaar het nie! Tot my verdere verbasing het hy ook in die 1960's tydens die Apollo-ruimteprogramme by NASA opleiding ontvang. Ek het self oorweeg om vir opleiding te gaan as spesialis vir die pendeltuig-program in 1983. My biologiese pa het later vir Pan Am en Delta as vlieënier gewerk.

In Oktober 2007 het ek eindelik my geboorteouers, Ann en Richard, en my geboortesuster en -broer, Kathy en David ontmoet. Ann het my die hele verhaal vertel van hoe sy in 1953 drie maande deurgebring het in die Florence Crittenden-tehuis vir ongehude moeders wat langs die Charlotte Memorial Hospital geleë is. Die meisies daar het almal skuilname gehad, en omdat sy lief was vir geskiedenis het sy die naam Virginia Dare gekies, die naam van die eerste baba wat in die Nuwe Wêreld onder die Britse setlaars gebore is. Die meeste meisies het haar net Dare genoem. Op sestien jaar was sy die jongste meisie daar.

Sy het vertel dat toe haar pa van haar "moeilikheid" hoor, hy bereid was om enigiets te doen om haar te help. Hy sou selfs met die hele gesin wegtrek as dit nodig was. Hy was 'n tyd lank werkloos en 'n baba in die huis sou 'n groot finansiële las wees, afgesien van alle ander probleme.

'n Goeie vriend van hom het selfs genoem dat hy weet van 'n dokter in Dillon, Suid-Carolina, wat haar sou kon "help". Maar haar ma wou niks *daarvan* hoor nie.

Ann het my vertel hoe sy een koue aand in Desember 1953 deur die leë strate gestap het, en opgekyk het na die sterre wat helder vonkel tussen die los wolke wat deur 'n koue wind voortgedryf word. Sy wou

’n rukkie alleen wees, met net die maan en sterre en haar ongebore kind – ek.

“Die sekelmaan het laag in die weste gehang. Jupiter was aan die opkom, om heelnag oor ons wag te hou. Richard het baie in sterrekunde belanggestel en hy het my later vertel dat Jupiter daardie nag in opposisie was en eers nege jaar later weer so helder sou skyn. In daardie tyd sou baie dinge in ons lewegebeur, soos die geboorte van nog twee kinders.

“Maar op daardie oomblik het ek net gedink hoe pragtig en helder die Koning van die Planete lyk, daar waar hy van bo af oor ons waak.”

Toe sy die ingangsportaal binnegaan, het sy meteens ’n blink gedagte gehad. Die meisies het gewoonlik twee weke ndeurgebring het hulle bevalling in die Crittenden-tehuis gebly voor hulle kon huis toe gaan en weer met hulle lewe voortgaan. As sy daardie nag sou geboorte gee, sou sy en ek dalk teen Kersfees kon tuis wees – as sy ná twee weke kon gaan. Dit sou ’n wonderwerk wees: om my vir Kersfees huis toe te neem.

“Dr Crawford het pas ’n ander bevalling gehad en hy het baie moeg gelyk,” het Ann vertel. Hy het die eterlappie oor haar gesig geplaas om die pyn te verlig, en sy was net halfbewus toe haar eerste kind om 2:42 vm die lewenslig aanskou het.

Ann wou my so graag vashou en liefkoos, en sy kon hoor hoe ek huil, maar die moegheid en verdowing het eindelik die oorhand gekry.

Eers Mars en toe Saturnus en Mercurius het hulle verskyning in die naglug gemaak voordat Venus eindelik in die ooste opgekom het om my in hierdie wêreld te groet. Intussen het Ann vir die eerste keer in maande diep geslaap.

Die verpleegster het haar met dagbreek wakker gemaak.

“Hier is iemand wat jou wil ontmoet,” het sy vrolik gesê en my in haar arms gelê, toegedraai in ’n ligblou kombersie.

“Die susters het almal gesê jy is die mooiste baba in die babakamer. Ek was so trots.”

Al wou Ann my hoe graag self grootmaak, het die wrede werklikheid gou tot haar deurgedring. Richard wou graag universiteit toe gaan, maar daardie drome sou my nie kon onderhou nie. Miskien het ek Ann se pyn aangevoel, want ek het ophou drink. Op elf dae is ek in die hospitaal opgeneem omdat ek nie gewig optel nie. Ek het my

eerste Kersfees en die daaropvolgende nege dae in die hospitaal in Charlotte deurgebring.

Nadat ek in die hospitaal opgeneem is, het Ann die twee uur lange busrit na haar tuisdorpie alleen aangepak. Sy was toe Kersfees saam met haar ouers, susters en vriende wat sy drie maande laas gesien het. Maar sonder my.

Teen die tyd dat ek weer begin gewig optel het, was my lewe sonder my ma op dreef. Ann het besef die kanse is skraal dat sy my sou kon behou. Toe sy net na Nuwejaar die hospitaal bel, moes sy hoor dat ek na die Children's Home Society in Greensboro gestuur is.

"'n Vrywilliger het jou soontoe geneem, hulle het my nie eens laat weet nie."

Ek het die volgende drie maande in 'n babakamer deurgebring, saam met verskeie ander pasgebore babas wie se moeders hulle nie self kon grootmaak nie. My bedjie was op die tweede verdieping van 'n blougrys Victoriaanse huis wat aan die vereniging geskenk is. "Dit was 'n baie aangename tuiste, al was dit 'n inrigting," het Ann vertel. Sy het in die daaropvolgende paar maande ses keer die drie uur lange busrit daarheen onderneem om my te besoek, in die hoop dat sy 'n plan sou kon maak om my te behou. Een keer het haar ma saamgekom en 'n ander keer Richard, hoewel die verpleegsters hom nie wou toelaat om in die kamer in te kom of om my vas te hou nie, en hy moes deur 'n venster na my kyk.

Maar teen Maart 1954 was dit duidelik dat dinge skipbreuk sou ly. Sy sou my moes afstaan. Sy en haar ma het 'n laaste keer die bus na Greensboro gehaal.

"Ek moes jou vashou en in jou oë kyk en vir jou probeer verduidelik," het Ann gesê. "Ek het geweet jy sou net murmel en lag en babageluidjies maak, wat ek ook al sê, maar ek wou tog self vir jou vertel. Ek het jou vir oulaas styf vasgehou, jou ore, jou magie, jou gesig gesoen en jou liggies gestreel. Ek het daardie wonderlike babageur diep ingeasem, ek onthou dit soos gister.

"Ek het jou op jou geboortenaam genoem en vir jou gesê hoe lief ek vir jou is en dat ek altyd vir jou sou lief wees, tot ek nie meer daar is nie. Ek het gesê, 'Asseblief, Here, laat hy weet hoe lief ek vir hom is en altyd sal wees.'

"Hoe kon ek weet of my gebede beantwoord sou word? In die

vyftigerjare het aannemings volgens baie streng reëls plaasgevind. Dit was finaal en in groot geheimhouding. Daar was geen omdraai nie, geen verduidelikings nie. Soms is geboortedatums selfs in die rekords verander, sodat niemand die baba se herkoms kon opspoor nie. Geen leidrade nie. Ooreenkomste is deur streng wette gereguleer. Die reël was om te vergeet dat dit ooit gebeur het en om aan te gaan met jou lewe. En hopelik daaruit te leer.

"Ek het jou 'n laaste keer gesoen en in jou bedjie neergelê. Ek het jou in jou blou kombersie toegedraai en 'n laaste keer in jou blou ogies gekyk, en toe my vinger gesoen en op jou voorkop geplaas.

"'Tot siens, Richard Michael. Ek is lief vir jou,' was my laaste woorde aan jou, tot omtrent 'n halfeeu later."

Ann het verder vertel dat nadat sy en Richard getroud is en hulle ander kinders gebore is, die begeerte by haar gegroei het om uit te vind wat van my geword het. Benewens vlieënier was Richard ook 'n gekwalifiseerde prokureur en Ann het gereken dit sou hom in staat stel om my aanneem-identiteit vas te stel. Maar Richard het gevoel die eerbare ding is om te hou by die aanneemooreenkoms wat hulle in 1954 gesluit het, en hy het dit nie opgevolg nie. In die vroeë sewentigerjare, op die hoogtepunt van die Viëtnam-oorlog, kon Ann nie my geboortedatum vergeet nie. Ek sou in Desember 1972 negentien jaar oud word. Sou ek militêre diens moes doen? Indien wel, wat sou daar van my word? Aan die begin was dit my plan om by die vloot aan te sluit as vlieënier. My visie was 20/100 en die lugmag het 20/20 sonder korreksie vereis. Maar daar was gerugte dat die vloot ons sou aanvaar met 20/100-visie. Maar teen dié tyd is die oorlog in Viëtnam afgeskaal en ek het nooit aangesluit nie, maar eerder met my mediese studies begin. Ann het dit alles natuurlik nie geweet nie. In die lente van 1973 het hulle op die TV gekyk hoe die oorlewende oorlogsgevangenes wat uit die "Hanoi Hilton" vrygelaat is, te voorskyn kom uit die vliegtuie wat uit Noord-Viëtnam terugkeer. Hulle het getreur oor vlieëniers wat hulle geken het, meer as die helfte van Richard se klasmaats wat nie teruggekom het nie, en die gedagte het by Ann posgevat dat ek dalk ook daar gesneuwel het. Ann het jare lank bly glo dat ek in die rysvelde van Viëtnam gesterf het. Sy sou sekerlik verbaas gewees het om te weet dat ek in Chapel Hill was, net 'n paar myl van haar af!

In die somer van 2008 het ek my biologiese pa en sy broer, Bob, en sy swaer, ook Bob, by Litchfield Beach, Suid-Carolina, ontmoet. Broer Bob is gedekoreer vir sy diens in die vloot gedurende die Koreaanse Oorlog en was ook ’n toetsvlieënier by China Lake (die vloot se wapentoetssentrum in die Kaliforniese woestyn, waar hy die Sidewinder-missielstelsel baasgeraak en F-104 Starfighters gevlieg het). Richard se swaer het weer in 1957 ’n spoedrekord geslaan, tydens Operation Sun Run, ’n aflosvlug om die wêreld deur F-101 Voodoo-stralers wat teen ’n gemiddelde snelheid van meer as 1 000 km/h daarin geslaag het “om vir die son weg te vlieg”.

Dit was vir my soos ’n reünie.

Die ontmoeting met my geboorteouers was die einde van die Jare van Nie Weet Nie. Jare wat, soos ek mettertyd agtergekom het, vir hulle net so pynlik was as vir my.

Daar was net een wond wat nie wou genees nie: die verlies tien jaar vantevore in 1998 van my geboortesuster Betsy (ja, dieselfde naam as my aanneemsuster Betsy, en hulle is albei met ’n Bob getroud, maar dis ’n verhaal vir ’n ander keer). Almal het my vertel dat sy ’n liefdevolle mens was en as sy nie by ’n sentrum vir verkragtingslagoffers gewerk het nie, was sy gewoonlik besig om ’n hele versameling rondloperhonde en -katte te versorg. “’n Regte engel,” het Ann haar genoem. Kathy het belowe om vir my ’n foto te stuur. Betsy het ook ’n stryd met alkohol gehad, soos ek, en haar verlies, wat gedeeltelik daaraan toe te skryf was, het my laat besef hoe gelukkig ek was dat ek my probleem kon oorkom. Ek het gewens dat ek Betsy kon ontmoet, om haar te troos – om vir haar te sê dat alle wonde genees en dat alles sal regkom.

Snaaks genoeg, ná die ontmoeting met my biologiese familie het ek vir die eerste keer in my lewe gevoel dat alles regtig sal regkom. Familie is belangrik, en ek het myne – of die meeste van myne – teruggekry. Dit was die eerste keer dat ek besef het hoe belangrik dit vir ’n mens is om te weet waar jy vandaan kom, dat dit jou diepste wese raak. Om te weet wat my biologiese oorsprong is, het my gehelp om dinge in myself te sien en te aanvaar wat ek nooit gedink het moontlik sal wees nie. Deur hulle te ontmoet, kon ek uiteindelik die knaende vrees besweer wat ek in my rondgedra het sonder dat ek dit besef: dat waar ek vandaan kom, biologies gesproke, niemand vir my

omgegee het, my liefgehad het nie. In my onderbewussyn het ek geglo dat ek dit nie verdien om liefgehê te word nie, dat ek selfs nie eens verdien om te bestaan nie. Die wete dat iemand van die begin af lief was vir my, het my op die mees ingrypende manier denkbaar begin genees. Ek het heel gevoel, soos nooit tevore nie.

Dit was egter nie die enigste insig wat ek op hierdie gebied sou kry nie. Die ander vraag, waarop ek die dag saam met Eben in die motor gedink het ek die antwoord gekry het – die vraag of daar werklik 'n liefdevolle God iewers is – het nog bly staan, en die antwoord in my gedagtes was nog steeds nee.

Ek moes eers sewe dae in 'n koma deurbring voordat ek dié vraag kon heroorweeg. En daar het ek ook 'n heel onverwagte antwoord gekry.

12.

The Core

Something pulled at me. Not like someone grabbing my arm, but something subtler, less physical. It was a little like when the sun dips behind a cloud and you feel your mood change instantly in response.

I was going back, away from the Core. Its inky-bright darkness faded into the green landscape of the Gateway, with all of its dazzling landscape. Looking down, I saw the villagers again, the trees and sparkling streams and the waterfalls, as well as the arcing angel-beings above.

My companion was there, too. She had been there the whole time, of course, all through my journey into the Core, in the form of that orblike ball of light. But now she was, once again, in human form. She wore the same beautiful dress, and seeing her again made me feel like a child lost in a huge and alien city who suddenly comes upon a familiar face. What a gift she was! "We will show you many things, but you will be going back." That message, delivered wordlessly to me at the entrance to the trackless darkness of the Core, came back to me now. I also now understood where "back" was.

The Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View where I had started this odyssey.

But it was different this time. Moving down into the darkness with the full knowledge of what lay above it, I no longer experienced the trepidation that I had when I was originally there. As the glorious music of the Gateway faded out and the pulse-like pounding of the lower realm returned, I heard and saw these things as an adult sees a place where he or she had once been frightened but is no longer afraid. The murk and darkness, the faces that bubbled up and faded away, the artery-like roots that came down from above, held no terror for me now, because I understood—in the wordless way I understood everything then—that I was no longer *of* this place, but only visiting it.

But *why* was I visiting it again?

The answer came to me in the same instantaneous, nonverbal way that the answers in the brilliant world above had been delivered. This whole adventure, it began to occur to me, was some kind of tour—

some kind of grand overview of the invisible, spiritual side of existence. And like all good tours, it included all floors and all levels.

Once I was back in the lower realm, the vagaries of time in these worlds beyond what I knew of this earth continued to hold. To get a little—if only a very little—idea of what this feels like, ponder how time lays itself out in dreams. In a dream, "before" and "after" become tricky designations. You can be in one part of the dream and know what's coming, even if you haven't experienced it yet. My "time" out beyond was something like that—though I should also underline that what happened to me had none of the murky confusion of our earthbound dreams, except at the very earliest stages, when I was still in the underworld.

How long was I there this time? Again I have no real idea—no way to gauge it. But I do know that after returning to the lower realm, it took a long time to discover that I actually had some control over my course—that I was no longer trapped in this lower world. With concerted effort, I could move back up to the higher planes. At a certain point in the murky depths, I found myself wishing for the Spinning Melody to return. After an initial struggle to recall the notes, the gorgeous music, and the spinning ball of light emitting it blossomed into my awareness. They cut, once again, through the jellied muck, and I began to rise.

In the worlds above, I slowly discovered, to know and be able to think of something is all one needs in order to move toward it. To think of the Spinning Melody was to make it appear, and to long for the higher worlds was to bring myself there. The more familiar I became with the world above, the easier it was to return to it. During my time out of my body, I accomplished this back-and-forth movement from the muddy darkness of the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View to the green brilliance of the Gateway and into the black but holy darkness of the Core any number of times. How many I can't say exactly—again because time as it was there just doesn't translate to our conception of time here on earth. But each time I reached the Core, I went deeper than before, and was taught more, in the wordless, more-than-verbal way that all things are communicated in the worlds above this one.

That doesn't mean that I saw anything like the whole universe, either in my original journey from the Earthworm's-Eye View up to the Core, or in the ones that came afterward. In fact, one of the truths driven home to me in the Core each time I returned to it was how

impossible it would be to understand all that exists—either its physical/visible side or its (much, much larger) spiritual/invisible side, not to mention the countless other universes that exist or have ever existed.

But none of that mattered, because I had already been taught the one thing—the only thing—that, in the last analysis, truly matters. I had initially received this piece of knowledge from my lovely companion on the butterfly wing upon my first entrance into the Gateway. It came in three parts, and to take one more shot at putting it into words (because of course it was initially delivered wordlessly), it would run something like this:

You are loved and cherished.

You have nothing to fear.

There is nothing you can do wrong.

If I had to boil this entire message down to one sentence, it would run this way:

You are loved.

And if I had to boil it down further, to just one word, it would (of course) be, simply:

Love.

Love is, without a doubt, the basis of everything. Not some abstract, hard-to-fathom kind of love but the day-to-day kind that everyone knows—the kind of love we feel when we look at our spouse and our children, or even our animals. In its purest and most powerful form, this love is not jealous or selfish, but *unconditional*. This is the reality of realities, the incomprehensibly glorious truth of truths that lives and breathes at the core of everything that exists or that ever will exist, and no remotely accurate understanding of who and what we are can be achieved by anyone who does not know it, and embody it in all of their actions.

Not much of a scientific insight? Well, I beg to differ. I'm back from that place, and nothing could convince me that this is not only the single most important emotional truth in the universe, but also the single most important *scientific* truth as well.

I've been talking about my experience, as well as meeting other people who study or have undergone near-death experiences, for several years now. I know that the term *unconditional love* gets bandied around a lot in those circles. How many of us can grasp what that truly means?

I know, of course, why the term comes up as much as it does. It's

because many, many other people have seen and experienced what I did. But like me, when these people come back to the earthly level, they're stuck with words, and words alone, to convey experiences and insights that lie completely beyond the power of words. It's like trying to write a novel with only half the alphabet.

The primary hurdle that most NDE subjects must jump is not how to reacclimate to the limitations of the earthly world—though this can certainly be a challenge—but how to convey what the love they experienced out there *actually feels like*.

Deep down, we already know. Just as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* always had the capability to return home, we have the ability to recover our connection with that idyllic realm. We just forget that we do, because during the brain-based, physical portion of our existence, our brain blocks out, or veils, that larger cosmic background, just as the sun's light blocks the stars from view each morning. Imagine how limited our view of the universe would be if we never saw the star-spangled nighttime sky.

We can only see what our brain's filter allows through. The brain—in particular its left-side linguistic/logical part, that which generates our sense of rationality and the feeling of being a sharply defined ego or self—is a barrier to our higher knowledge and experience.

It is my belief that we are now facing a crucial time in our existence. We need to recover more of that larger knowledge *while living here on earth,* while our brains (including its left-side analytical parts) are fully functioning. Science—the science to which I've devoted so much of my life—doesn't contradict what I learned up there. But far, far too many people believe it does, because certain members of the scientific community, who are pledged to the materialist worldview, have insisted again and again that science and spirituality cannot coexist.

They are mistaken. Making this ancient but ultimately basic fact more widely known is why I have written this book, and it renders all the other aspects of my story—the mystery of how I contracted my illness, of how I managed to be conscious in another dimension for the week of my coma, and how I somehow recovered so completely—entirely secondary.

The unconditional love and acceptance that I experienced on my journey is the single most important discovery I have ever made, or will ever make, and as hard as I know it's going to be to unpack the other lessons I learned while there, I also know in my heart that

sharing this very basic message—one so simple that most children readily accept it—is the most important task I have.

12.

Die Kern

Iets trek aan my. Nie soos iemand wat my aan die arm trek nie, maar iets meer subtiels, minder fisiek. Dit is ’n bietjie soos wanneer die son agter ’n wolk verdwyn en mens se gemoedstemming onmiddellik verander.

Ek beweeg weg, weg van die Kern af. Die pikswart donkerte gaan oor in die skitterende, groen landskap van die Poort. Onder sien ek weer die dorpenaars, die bome en sprankelende strome en watervalle, en bokant my die swewende engel-wesens.

My metgesel is ook daar. Sy was natuurlik die hele tyd daar, op my reis na die Kern, in die vorm van daardie ligsfeer. Maar nou is sy weer in die vorm van ’n mens. Sy het weer die pragtige rok aan, en om haar te sien laat my voel soos ’n kind wat in ’n groot, vreemde stad verdwaal het en skielik ’n bekende gesig sien. Wat ’n seën was sy! “Ons sal jou baie dinge wys, maar jy sal weer teruggaan.” Daardie boodskap, wat sy my sonder woorde by die ingang tot die onpeilbare duisternis van die Kern gegeehet, kom nou terug na my. Nou verstaan ek waar “terug” is.

Die Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief waar hierdie reis begin het.

Maar hierdie keer is dit anders. Om weer in die donker af te daal in die wete van wat daarbo is, is nie vir my so vreesaanjaend as toe ek eers daar was nie. Die hemelse musiek van die Poort vervaag en ek hoor weer die gedreun van die laer ryk, maar ek hoor en sien hierdie dinge soos ’n volwassene ’n plek sien waar hy of sy eenmaal bang was, maar nou nie meer nie. Die slym en donkerte, die gesigte wat opdoem en wegsak, die verstrengelde boomwortels hou nou vir my geen bedreiging in nie, want ek verstaan nou, sonder woorde, soos ek alles daar verstaan, dat ek nie deel is van hierdie plek nie, maar net ’n tydelike besoeker.

Maar waarom besoek ek dit weer?

Die antwoord kom op dieselfde regstreekse nieverbale manier

waarop antwoorde in die helder wêreld daarbo oorgedra is. Dit begin nou tot my deurdring dat hierdie hele avontuur ’n soort besigtigingstoer is – ’n groot oorsig oor die onsigbare, geestelike sy van ons bestaan. En soos alle goeie toere sluit dit al die verdiepings en vlakke in.

Terug in die laer ryk duur die vreemde tydsbelewing van dié wêrelde anderkant die aardse bestaan voort. Om ’n idee te kry van hoe dit voel, dink aan hoe tyd in drome verloop. In ’n droom word “vroeër” en “later” moeilike begrippe. Jy kan in een deel van die droom wees en weet wat gaan gebeur, selfs al het jy dit nog nie ervaar nie. My tyd daar anderkant was so, maar dit was ook heel anders, want die dinge wat met my gebeur het was nie so duister en deurmekaar soos ons aardse drome nie, behalwe reg aan die begin, toe ek nog in die onderwêreld was.

Hoe lank was ek hierdie keer in die laer ryk? Ek weet nie regtig nie, daar is geen manier om dit te meet nie. Maar toe ek daar aankom, duur dit lank voordat ek besef dat ek in werklikheid ’n mate van beheer het oor my bewegings – dat ek nie vasgevang is nie. As ek hard probeer, kan ek terugbeweeg na die hoër vlakke. Ná ’n ruk daar in die duistere dieptes wens ek die Spiraalmusiek kom terug. Eers kan ek nie die note onthou nie, maar toe ontvou die pragtige melodie en die draaiende ligbal in my bewussyn. Dit dring weer deur die jellierige slym en ek begin opstyg.

In die wêrelde daar bo, het ek mettertyd agtergekom, as ’n mens nader aan iets wil beweeg, hoef jy net daarvan te weet en daaraan te dink. As ek aan die Spiraalmelodie dink, dan is dit daar en as ek na die hoër wêrelde verlang, dan is ek vanself daar. Hoe meer bekend die wêreld daar bo geraak het, hoe makliker was dit om daarheen terug te keer. Gedurende my tyd buite my liggaam het ek verskeie kere heen en weer beweeg tussen die duister Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief en die skitterende groen van die Poort en dan in die pikswart maar heilige donkerte van die Kern. Ek kan nie sê presies hoeveel keer nie – tyd was daar heeltemal anders as ons begrip van tyd hier op aarde. Maar elke keer dat ek die Kern bereik het, het ek dieper inbeweeg en meer geleer, op die woordelose manier waarop alle dinge in die wêrelde bokant hierdie een oorgedra word.

Dit beteken nie dat ek naastenby die volledige heelal gesien het nie,

nie in my eerste reis van die Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief tot by die Kern, of daarna nie. Trouens, een van die waarhede wat ek elke keer in die Kern geleer het, was hoe onmoontlik dit sou wees om alles wat bestaan te verstaan – die sigbare fisieke, tasbare deel daarvan of die veel groter onsigbare, geestelike deel, of die talle ander heelalle wat bestaan of ooit bestaan het.

Maar dit het nie meer saak gemaak nie, want ek het reeds die een ding geleer – die enigste ding – wat op die ou einde waarlik saak maak. Ek het hierdie kennis van my pragtige metgesel op die vlinder se vlerk aan die begin, met my eerste besoek aan die Poort, ontvang. Dit was in drie dele en as ek weer moes probeer om dit in woorde te stel (want dit het woordeloos na my toe gekom), dan sou dit so lui:

Jy word liefgehê en gekoester.
Jy hoef niks te vrees nie.
Daar is niks wat jy verkeerd kan doen nie.

As ek hierdie boodskap verder moes verkort, tot een sin, dan sou dit so lui:

Jy word liefgehê.

En as ek dit nog verder moes verkort, tot net een woord, sou dit (natuurlik) eenvoudig wees:

Liefde.

Liefde is, sonder twyfel, die grondslag van alles. Nie een of ander abstrakte, moeilik verstaanbare soort liefde nie, maar die alledaagse soort – die soort wat ons voel wanneer ons aan ons lewensmaat of aan ons kinders dink, of selfs aan ons troeteldiere. In die suiwerste en sterkste vorm is hierdie liefde nie jaloers of selfsugtig nie, maar onvoorwaardelik. Dit is die grootste realiteit, die onbegryplik wonderbare waarheid, aan die kern van alles wat bestaan of ooit sal bestaan, en iemand wat dit nie weet en in al sy dade uitleef nie, sal nie naastenby kan verstaan wie of wat ons is nie.

Nie veel van 'n wetenskaplike insig nie? Inteendeel. Ek het van die ander wêreld teruggekeer met die oortuiging dat dit nie net die belangrikste emosionele waarheid in die heelal is nie, maar ook die belangrikste *wetenskaplike* waarheid.

Ek het die afgelope paar jaar met baie mense oor my ervaring gesels en ander mense ontmoet wat 'n nabydood-ervaring gehad het of dit bestudeer. Ek weet dat die term *onvoorwaardelike liefde* dikwels in daardie kringe gebruik word. Wie van ons begryp wat dit werklik beteken?

Ek weet natuurlik waarom die term so dikwels opduik. Dit is omdat talle ander mense dieselfde ervaring as ek gehad het. Maar, soos ek, wanneer hierdie mense weer na die aardse vlak terugkeer, is woorde al wat hulle het om ervarings en insigte oor te dra wat geheel en al buite die mag van woorde lê. Dit is soos om 'n roman te skryf met net die helfte van die letters in die alfabet.

Die eerste struikelblok vir die meeste mense wat 'n NDE gehad het, is nie om weer aan die beperkings van die aardse wêreld gewoond te raak nie – hoewel dit 'n aanpassing is – maar hoe om ander mense te laat verstaan hoe die liefde wat hulle daar ervaar het *werklik voel*.

In ons diepste wese weet ons dit. Net soos Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* altyd die vermoë gehad het om huis toe te gaan, het ons die vermoë om ons verbinding met daardie idilliese wêreld te herontdek. Ons vergeet maar net dat ons dit weet, want in die liggaamlike deel van ons bestaan, waar die brein in beheer is, word daardie kosmiese oorsprong versluier, of geblokkeer, net soos die lig van die son elke oggend die sterre blokkeer. Dink net hoe beperk ons begrip van die heelal sou wees as ons nooit die sterreprag van die naghemel kon sien nie.

Ons kan net sien wat die brein se filter deurlaat. Die brein – veral die linkerhelfte waar ons taal- en logiese vermoë gesetel is, wat ons rasionele funksies en ons bewustheid van 'n afsonderlike ego of self moontlik maak – verhinder ook ons toegang tot hoër kennis en ervaring.

Ek is oortuig dat ons nou 'n kritieke tydperk in ons bestaan tegemoetgaan. Ons moet meer van daardie groter kennis herontdek *terwyl ons hier op aarde is*, terwyl ons brein, met inbegrip van die analitiese linkerdeel, ten volle funksioneer. Wetenskap – waaraan ek so 'n groot deel van my lewe gewy het – weerspreek nie wat ek daar bo geleer het nie. Maar veels te veel mense glo dat dit wel so is, omdat sekere wetenskaplikes wat 'n materialistiese wêreldbeskouing huldig, daarop aandring dat die wetenskaplike en geestelike uitgangspunte onversoenbaar is.

Hulle het dit mis. Die groot rede waarom ek hierdie boek geskryf het, is om dié oeroue en grondliggende insig te versprei, en dit is belangriker as enige ander aspek van my verhaal. Die raaisel van hoe ek die siekte opgedoen het, hoe ek 'n week lank in 'n ander dimensie

bewus was en hoe ek ten volle herstel het, is alles ondergeskik aan die boodskap dat wetenskaplike kennis en geloof in die geestelike aspek van die mens nie teenstrydig is nie.

Die onvoorwaardelike liefde en aanvaarding wat ek op my reis ervaar het, is die grootste enkele insig waartoe ek nog ooit gekom het, of ooit sal kom. Die taak om die ander insigte wat ek daar gekry het uit te lê gaan moeilik wees, maar ek weet ook in my diepste wese dat om hierdie basiese insig met ander te deel – 'n insig wat so eenvoudig is dat die meeste kinders dit geredelik aanvaar – die belangrikste taak van my lewe is.

13.

Wednesday

For two days, "Wednesday" had been the buzzword—the day on my doctors' lips when it came to describing my chances. As in: "We hope to see some improvement by Wednesday." And now here Wednesday was, without so much as a glimmer of change in my condition.

"When can I see Dad?"

This question—the natural one for a ten-year-old whose father is in the hospital—had been coming from Bond regularly since I had gone into a coma on Monday. Holley had been fending it off successfully for two days, but on Wednesday morning, she decided it was time to address it.

When Holley had told Bond, on Monday night, that I wasn't home from the hospital yet because I was "sick," he conjured what that word had always meant to him, up to this point in his ten years of life: a cough, a sore throat—maybe a headache. Granted, his appreciation of just how much a headache can actually hurt had been greatly expanded by what he'd seen on Monday morning. But when Holley finally brought him to the hospital that Wednesday afternoon, he was still hoping to be greeted by something very different from what he saw in my hospital bed.

Bond saw a body that already bore only a distant resemblance to what he knew as his father. When someone is sleeping, you can look at them and tell there's still a person inhabiting the body. There's a presence. But most doctors will tell you it's different when a person is in a coma (even if they can't tell you exactly why). The body is there, but there's a strange, almost physical sensation that the person is missing. That their essence, inexplicably, is somewhere else.

Eben IV and Bond had always been very close, ever since Eben ran into the delivery suite when Bond was only minutes old to hug his brand new brother. Eben met Bond at the hospital that third day of my coma and did what he could to frame the situation positively for his younger brother. And, being hardly more than a boy himself, he came up with a scenario he thought Bond would be able to appreciate: a battle.

"Let's make a picture of what's going on so Dad will see it when he

gets better," he said to Bond.

So on a table in the hospital dining area, they laid out a big sheet of orange paper and drew a representation of what was happening inside my comatose body. They drew my white blood cells, wearing capes and armed with swords, defending the besieged territory of my brain. And, armed with their own swords and slightly different uniforms, they drew the invading *E. coli*. There was hand-to-hand combat, and the bodies of the slain on both sides were scattered about.

It was an accurate enough representation, in its way. The only thing about it that was inaccurate, taking into account the simplification of the obviously more complex event going on inside my body, was the way the battle was going. In Eben and Bond's rendition, the battle was pitched and at a white heat, with both sides struggling and the outcome uncertain—though, of course, the white blood cells would eventually win. But as he sat with Bond, colored markers spread out on the table, trying to share in this naïve version of events, Eben knew that in truth, the battle was no longer pitched, or so uncertain.

And he knew which side was winning.

13.

Woensdag

Twee dae lank was Woensdag die sleutelwoord op almal se lippe – die dag waaraan my dokters my kanse op herstel gekoppel het. Soos “Ons hoop om teen Woensdag ’n verbetering te sien.” En nou het Woensdag aangebreek sonder ’n sprankie verbetering in my toestand.

“Wanneer kan ek na Pappa toe gaan?”

Hierdie vraag – ’n vanselfsprekende een vir ’n tien jaar oue seun wie se pa in die hospitaal is – is kort-kort deur Bond gevra vandat ek die Maandag in ’n koma geraak het. Holley het die besoek die voorafgaande twee dae ontwyk, maar Woensdagoggend besluit sy dit kan nie langer vermy word nie.

Toe Holley Maandagaand vir Bond vertel het dat ek nie kon huis toe kom nie omdat ek “siek” is, het hy ’n beeld van “siek wees” opgeroep wat hy in sy tien jaar geken het: ’n lastige hoes, ’n seer keel, miskien hoofpyn. Sy idee van hoe erg hoofpyn kan wees, het wel Maandagoggend verander. Maar toe Holley hom Woensdagmiddag hospitaal toe bring, sien hy ’n heel ander prentjie as wat hy verwag het.

Bond sien ’n liggaam in die hospitaalbed wat nie naastenby ooreenkom met die pa wat hy geken het nie. As iemand slaap, kan ’n mens na hulle kyk en sien daar is ’n persoon wat die liggaam bewoon. ’n Daar is ’n teenwoordigheid. Maar die meeste dokters sal bevestig dat dit anders is wanneer iemand in ’n koma is (selfs al kan hulle dit nie verklaar nie). Die liggaam is daar, maar daar is ’n vreemde, byna fisieke aanvoeling dat die persoon self afwesig is. Dat hulle innerlike wese onverklaarbaar elders is.

Eben IV en Bond was altyd geheg aan mekaar, van die dag wat Eben in die kraamsaal ingehardloop het om sy nuwe boetie ’n drukkie te gee. Eben het Bond op dié derde dag van my koma by die hospitaal ontmoet en sy bes probeer om die situasie op ’n positiewe manier aan sy jonger broer te skets. En hy het ’n scenario geskets wat hy, synde

self nog maar ’n jong seun, gedink het Bond sal verstaan: ’n veldslag.

“Kom ons teken ’n prent van Pappa se siekte, dan kan hy dit sien wanneer hy weer gesond is,” het hy vir Bond gesê.

Hulle rol toe op ’n tafel in die hospitaalkafeteria ’n groot vel oranje papier oop en teken ’n voorstelling van wat in my liggaam aan die gang iss. Hulle teken my witbloedselle met mantels aan en met swaarde gewapen, wat die bedreigde grondgebied van my brein verdedig. En, ook met swaarde gewapen en ’n ander uniform, die *E. coli*-invalsmag. Dit is ’n hewige stryd, met gesneuwelde vegters wat oral rondlê.

Op ’n manier was dit ’n getroue uitbeelding. Al wat nie met die werklikheid ooreengestem het nie, was die stand van die stryd. In Eben en Bond se weergawe was dit ’n vel stryd, maar gelyk en met ’n onseker uitkoms – hoewel die witbloedselle natuurlik uiteindelik sou wen. Maar waar hy met die kleurpenne op die tafel uitgepak, by Bond gesit, en probeer het om aan die naïewe uitbeelding van die gebeure deel te neem, het Eben geweet dat die stryd nie meer so gelyk is nie, en die uitkoms nie so onseker nie.

Hy het geweet watter kant besig is om die oorhand te kry.

14.

A Special Kind of NDE

> *The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense in which he has attained liberation from the self.*
>
> —ALBERT EINSTEIN (1879–1955)

When I was initially in the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View, I had no real center of consciousness. I didn't know who or what I was, or even *if* I was. I was simply . . . *there*, a singular awareness in the midst of a soupy, dark, muddy nothingness that had no beginning and, seemingly, no end.

Now, however, I knew. I understood that I was part of the Divine and that nothing—absolutely nothing—could ever take that away. The (false) suspicion that we can somehow be separated from God is the root of every form of anxiety in the universe, and the cure for it—which I received partially within the Gateway and completely within the Core—was the knowledge that nothing can tear us from God, ever. This knowledge—and it remains the single most important thing I've ever learned—robbed the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View of its terror and allowed me to see it for what it really was: a not entirely pleasant, but no doubt necessary, part of the cosmos.

Many people have traveled to the realms I did, but, strangely enough, most remembered their earthly identities while away from their earthly forms. They knew that they were John Smith or George Johnson or Sarah Brown. They never lost sight of the fact that they lived on earth. They were aware that their living relatives were still there, waiting and hoping they would come back. They also, in many cases, met friends and relatives who had died before them, and in these cases, too, they recognized those people instantly.

Many NDE subjects have reported engaging in life reviews, in which they saw their interactions with various people and their good or bad actions during the course of their lives.

I experienced none of these events, and taken all together they

demonstrate the single most unusual aspect of my NDE. I was completely free of my bodily identity for all of it, so that any classic NDE occurrence that might have involved my remembering who I was on earth was rigorously missing.

To say that at that point in the proceedings I still had no idea who I was or where I'd come from sounds somewhat perplexing, I know. After all, how could I be learning all these stunningly complex and beautiful things, how could I see the girl next to me, and the blossoming trees and waterfalls and villagers, and still not know that it was I, Eben Alexander, who was the one experiencing them? How could I understand all that I did, yet not realize that on earth I was a doctor, husband, and father? A person who was not seeing trees and rivers and clouds for the first time when I entered the Gateway, but one who had seen more than his share of them as a child growing up in the very concrete and earthly locale of Winston-Salem, North Carolina?

My best shot at an answer is to suggest that I was in a position similar to that of someone with partial but beneficial amnesia. That is, a person *who has forgotten some key aspect about him or herself,* but *who benefits through having forgotten it,* even if for only a short while.

How did I gain from not remembering my earthly self? It allowed me to go deep into realms beyond the worldly without having to worry about what I was leaving behind. Throughout my entire time in those worlds, I was a soul with nothing to lose. No places to miss, no people to mourn. I had come from nowhere and had no history, so I fully accepted my circumstances—even the initial murk and mess of the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View—with equanimity.

And because I so completely forgot my mortal identity, I was granted full access to the true cosmic being I really am (and *we* all are). Once again, in some ways my experience was analogous to a dream, in which you remember some things about yourself while forgetting other things completely. But again this is only a partially useful analogy, because, as I keep stressing, the Gateway and the Core were not remotely dreamlike but ultra-real—as far from illusory as one can be. To use the word *removed* makes it sound as if the absence of my earthly memories while in the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View, the Gateway, and the Core was in some manner intentional. I now suspect that this was the case. At the risk of oversimplifying, I was allowed to die harder, and travel deeper, than almost all NDE subjects before me.

As arrogant as that might sound, my intentions are not. The rich literature on NDEs has proved crucial to understanding my own journey in coma. I can't claim to know why I had the experience I had, but I do know now (three years later), from reading other NDE literature, that the penetration of the higher worlds tends to be a gradual process and requires that the individual release his or her attachments to whatever level he or she is on before going higher or deeper.

That was not a problem for me, because throughout my experience I had no earthly memories whatsoever, and the only pain and heartache I felt was when I had to return to earth, where I'd begun.

14.

’n Spesiale Soort NDE

The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense in which he has attained liberation from the self.
ALBERT EINSTEIN (1879-1955)

Toe ek aanvanklik in die Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief was, het ek geen sentrum van bewussyn gehad nie. Ek het nie geweet wie of wat ek is nie, of selfs dat ek bestaan nie. Ek was net … daar, ’n enkele bewussyn binne-in ’n digte, donker, modderige niks – sonder begin en, oënskynlik, sonder einde.

Later het ek egter geweet. Ek het verstaan dat ek deel is van die Opperwese en dat niks – absoluut niks – dit kan wegneem nie. Die (valse) vermoede dat ons op die een of ander manier van God vervreem kan raak, is die oorsaak van elke soort angs in die heelal, en die genesing daarvoor – wat ek gedeeltelik in die Poort en volledig in die Kern ervaar het – is die wete dat niks ons ooit van God kan vervreem nie. Hierdie besef – en dit is steeds die belangrikste insig wat ek nog ooit gekry het – het die bedreiging van die Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief weggeneem en my toegelaat om te verstaan wat dit werklik is: ’n minder aangename, maar noodsaaklike deel van die kosmos.

Talle mense het al na die wêrelde gereis waar ek was, maar dit is tog vreemd dat die meeste van hulle hulle aardse identiteit onthou het terwyl hulle van hulle liggaam verwyder was. Hulle het geweet hulle is John Smith of George Johnson of Sarah Brown. Hulle het nie vergeet dat hulle op aarde leef nie. Hulle het geweet dat hulle geliefdes nog daar is, en vir hulle wag en hoop dat hulle sal terugkom. Hulle het ook in baie gevalle vriende en familie ontmoet wat voor hulle gesterf het, en dan het hulle daardie mense onmiddellik herken. Baie mense wat ’n NDE gehad het, het ook ’n oorsig van hulle lewe gesien, waar hulle hulle interaksies met verskillende mense en hulle goeie en slegte dade in oënskou kon neem.

Ek het geen van hierdie gewaarwordinge in my NDE gehad nie. Al

hierdie verskille is ’n aanduiding van die mees uitsonderlike aspek van my ervaring. Ek was deurgaans verwyder van my liggaamlike identiteit, gevolglik was daar geen tipiese NDE-gebeurtenisse waartydens ek my lewe op aarde onthou het of daarvan bewus was nie.

Dat ek steeds geen besef gehad het van wie ek is of waar ek vandaan kom nie, klink nogal vreemd, dit besef ek. Hoe kon ek per slot van sake hierdie uiters komplekse en wonderlike waarhede leer, hoe kon ek die meisie langs my sien, en die bloeisels aan die bome en watervalle en dorpsmense, en nog steeds nie weet dat dit ek, Eben Alexander, is wat dit alles beleef nie? Hoe kon ek dit alles verstaan, en nog steeds nie besef dat ek op aarde ’n dokter, eggenoot en vader is nie? Iemand wat nie vir die eerste keer bome en riviere en wolke gesien het toe ek die Poort binnegegaan het nie, maar wat as kind in die konkrete en aardse omgewing van Winston-Salem, Noord-Carolina, meer as genoeg daarvan gesien het?

Al verklaring wat ek kan bied, is dat ek in ’n soortgelyke situasie was as iemand met gedeeltelike maar heilsame geheueverlies, dit wil sê iemand *wat ’n kernaspek van homself vergeet het*, maar *tot wie se voordeel dit is dat hy dit vergeet het*, al is dit net vir ’n kort rukkie.

Hoe was dit tot my voordeel dat ek nie my aardse self onthou het nie? Dit het my in staat gestel om diep in die ander wêrelde in te gaan, sonder dat ek my hoef te bekommer oor wat ek agterlaat. In die tyd wat ek daar deurgebring het, was ek ’n siel met niks om te verloor nie. Geen bekende plekke waarna ek sou verlang nie, geen mense oor wie ek sou treur nie. Ek het geen herkoms of geskiedenis gehad nie, en het dus my omstandighede ten volle aanvaar – selfs die aanvanklike duister en deurmekaar Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief.

En omdat ek my sterflike identiteit so volkome vergeet het, het ek toegang verkry tot die ware kosmiese wese wat ek – en elkeen van ons – werklik is. Dit is so dat my ervaring met ’n droom vergelyk kan word, waar ’n mens sommige dinge onthou en ander heeltemal vergeet. Maar hierdie vergelyking geld net in sommige opsigte, omdat – soos ek telkens moet beklemtoon – die Poort en die Kern glad nie soos ’n droom was nie, maar ultra-werklik. Dit was allesbehalwe ’n illusie. As ek die woord *verwyder* gebruik, klink dit asof die afwesigheid van my aardse herinneringe terwyl ek in die Ryk van die

Erdwurmperspektief, die Poort en die Kern was, op een of ander manier doelbewus was. Ek vermoed dat dit wel so was. Om dit eenvoudig te stel, ek is toegelaat om nader aan die dood en verder in die hiernamaals te reis as byna almal wat voor my ’n NDE gehad het.

Dit klink miskien aanmatigend, maar dit is nie my bedoeling nie. Die uitgebreide literatuur oor NDE was deurslaggewend vir my begrip van my eie reis in koma. Ek maak nie daarop aanspraak dat ek weet waarom ek die ervaring gehad het nie, maar ek weet nou (drie jaar later), uit die lees van ander NDE-literatuur, dat die kennismaking met die hoër wêrelde ’n geleidelike proses is en vereis dat die betrokke persone hulle verbintenis met die vlak waar hulle is, moet laat vaar voordat hulle hoër of dieper gaan.

Dit was nie vir my ’n probleem nie, omdat ek deur die hele ervaring geen aardse herinneringe gehad het nie. Die enigste pyn en hartseer wat ek ervaar het, was toe ek moes terugkeer aarde toe, waar ek begin het.

15.

The Gift of Forgetting

We must believe in free will. We have no choice.

—Isaac B. Singer (1902–1991)

The view of human consciousness held by most scientists today is that it is composed of digital information—data, that is, of essentially the same kind used by computers. Though some bits of this data—seeing a spectacular sunset, hearing a beautiful symphony for the first time, even falling in love—may feel more profound or special to us than the countless other bits of information created and stored in our brains, this is really just an illusion. All bits are, in fact, qualitatively the same. Our brains model outside reality by taking the information that comes in through our senses and transforming it into a rich digital tapestry. But our perceptions are just a model—not reality itself. An *illusion*.

This was, of course, the view I held as well. I can remember being in medical school and occasionally hearing arguments that consciousness is nothing more than a very complex computer program. These arguments suggested that the ten billion or so neurons firing constantly within our brains are capable of producing a lifetime of consciousness and memory.

To understand how the brain might actually block our access to knowledge of the higher worlds, we need to accept—at least hypothetically and for the moment—that the brain itself doesn't produce consciousness. That it is, instead, a kind of reducing valve or filter, shifting the larger, nonphysical consciousness that we possess in the nonphysical worlds down into a more limited capacity for the duration of our mortal lives. There is, from the earthly perspective, a very definite advantage to this. Just as our brains work hard every moment of our waking lives to filter out the barrage of sensory information coming at us from our physical surroundings, selecting the material we actually need in order to survive, so it is that forgetting our trans-earthly identities also allows us to be "here and

now" far more effectively. Just as most of ordinary life holds too much information for us to take in at once and still get anything done, being excessively conscious of the worlds beyond the here and now would slow down our progress even more. If we knew too much of the spiritual realm now, then navigating our lives on earth would be an even greater challenge than it already is. (That's not to say we shouldn't be conscious of the worlds beyond now—only that if we are extra-conscious of their grandeur and immensity, they can prevent action while still here on earth.) From a more purpose-focused perspective (and I now believe the universe is nothing if not purposeful), making the right decisions through our free will in the face of the evil and injustice on earth would mean far less if we remembered, while here, the full beauty and brilliance of what awaits us.

Why am I so sure of all this? For two reasons. The first is that I was shown it (by the beings who taught me when I was in the Gateway and the Core), and the second is because I actually experienced it. While beyond my body, I received knowledge about the nature and structure of the universe that was vastly beyond my comprehension. But I received it anyhow, in large part because, with my worldly preoccupations out of the way, I had room to do so. Now that I'm back on earth and remember my bodily identity, the seed of that trans-earthly knowledge has once again been covered over. And yet it's still there. I can feel it, at every moment. It will take years, in this earthly environment, to come to fruition. That is, it will take me years to understand, using my mortal, material brain, what I understood so instantly and easily in the brain-free realms of the world beyond. Yet I'm confident that with hard work on my part, much of that knowledge will continue to unfold.

To say that there is still a chasm between our current scientific understanding of the universe and the truth as I saw it is a considerable understatement. I still love physics and cosmology, still love studying our vast and wonderful universe. Only I now have a greatly enlarged conception of what "vast" and "wonderful" really mean. The physical side of the universe is as a speck of dust compared to the invisible and spiritual part. In my past view, *spiritual* wasn't a word that I would have employed during a scientific conversation. Now I believe it is a word that we cannot afford to leave out.

From the Core, my understanding of what we call "dark energy" and "dark matter" seemed to have clear explanations, as did far more

advanced components of the makeup of our universe that humans won't address for ages.

This doesn't mean, however, that I can explain them to you. That's because—paradoxically—I am still in the process of understanding them myself. Perhaps the best way of conveying that part of the experience is to say that I had a foretaste of another, larger kind of knowledge: one I believe human beings will be able to access in ever larger numbers in the future. But conveying that knowledge now is rather like being a chimpanzee, becoming a human for a single day to experience all of the wonders of human knowledge, and then returning to one's chimp friends and trying to tell them what it was like knowing several different Romance languages, the calculus, and the immense scale of the universe.

Up there, a question would arise in my mind, and the answer would arise at the same time, like a flower coming up right next to it. It was almost as if, just as no physical particle in the universe is really separate from another, so in the same way there was no such thing as a question without an accompanying answer. These answers were not simple "yes" or "no" fare, either. They were vast conceptual edifices, staggering structures of living thought, as intricate as cities. Ideas so vast they would have taken me lifetimes to find my way around if I had been confined to earthly thought. But I wasn't. I had sloughed off that earthly style of thought like a butterfly breaking from a chrysalis.

I saw the earth as a pale blue dot in the immense blackness of physical space. I could see that earth was a place where good and evil mixed, and that this constituted one of its unique features. Even on earth there is much more good than evil, but earth is a place where evil is allowed to gain influence in a way that would be entirely impossible at higher levels of existence. That evil could occasionally have the upper hand was known and allowed by the Creator as a necessary consequence of giving the gift of free will to beings like us.

Small particles of evil were scattered throughout the universe, but the sum total of all that evil was as a grain of sand on a vast beach compared to the goodness, abundance, hope, and unconditional love in which the universe was literally awash. The very fabric of the alternate dimension is love and acceptance, and anything that does not have these qualities appears immediately and obviously out of place there.

But free will comes at the cost of a loss or falling-away from this love and acceptance. We are free; but we are free beings hemmed all

around by an environment conspiring to make us feel that we are not free. Free will is of central importance for our function in the earthly realm: a function that, we will all one day discover, serves the much higher role of allowing our ascendance in the timeless alternate dimension. Our life down here may seem insignificant, for it is minute in relation to the other lives and other worlds that also crowd the invisible and visible universes. But it is also hugely important, for our role here is to grow toward the Divine, and that growth is closely watched by the beings in the worlds above—the souls and lucent orbs (those beings I saw originally far above me in the Gateway, and which I believe are the origin of our culture's concept of angels).

We—the spiritual beings currently inhabiting our evolutionarily developed mortal brains and bodies, the product of the earth and the exigencies of the earth—make the real choices. True thought is not the brain's affair. But we have—in part by the brain itself—been so trained to associate our brains with what we think and who we are that we have lost the ability to realize that we are at all times much more than the physical brains and bodies that do—or should do—our bidding.

True thought is pre-physical. This is the thinking-behind-the-thinking responsible for all the genuinely consequential choices we make in the world. A thinking that is not dependent on linear deduction, but that moves fast as lightning, making connections on different levels, bringing them together. In the face of this free, inner intelligence, our ordinary thought is hopelessly slow and fumbling. It's this thinking that catches the football in the end zone, that comes up with the inspired scientific insight or writes the inspired song. The subliminal thinking that is always there, when we really need it, but that we have all too often lost the ability both to access and to believe in. Needless to say, it's the thinking that sprang into action the evening of that skydive when Chuck's chute opened up suddenly beneath me.

To experience thinking outside the brain is to enter a world of instantaneous connections that make ordinary thinking (i.e., those aspects limited by the physical brain and the speed of light) seem like some hopelessly sleepy and plodding event. Our truest, deepest self is completely free. It is not crippled or compromised by past actions or concerned with identity or status. It comprehends that it has no need to fear the earthly world, and therefore, it has no need to build itself up through fame or wealth or conquest.

This is the true spiritual self that all of us are destined someday to recover. But until that day comes, I feel, we should do everything in our power to get in touch with this miraculous aspect of ourselves—to cultivate it and bring it to light. This is the being living within all of us right now and that is, in fact, the being that God truly intends us to be.

How do we get closer to this genuine spiritual self? By manifesting love and compassion. Why? Because love and compassion are far more than the abstractions many of us believe them to be. They are real. They are concrete. And they make up the very fabric of the spiritual realm.

In order to return to that realm, we must once again become *like* that realm, even while we are stuck in, and plodding through, this one.

One of the biggest mistakes people make when they think about God is to imagine God as impersonal. Yes, God is behind the numbers, the perfection of the universe that science measures and struggles to understand. But—again, paradoxically—Om is “human” as well—even *more* human than you and I are. Om understands and sympathizes with our human situation more profoundly and personally than we can even imagine because Om knows what we have forgotten, and understands the terrible burden it is to live with amnesia of the Divine for even a moment.

15.

Die Gawe van Vergetelheid

We must believe in free will. We have no choice.
ISAAC B. SINGER (1902-1991)

Die siening wat die meeste wetenskaplikes vandag oor die mens se bewussyn het, is dat dit uit digitale inligting bestaan – dit wil sê, data wat wesenlik dieselfde is as die soort wat rekenaars gebruik. Sekere deeltjies van die data – ’n asemrowende sonsondergang, ’n pragtige simfonie, om verlief te raak – mag vir ons meer spesiaal of van dieper waarde wees as die ontelbare ander inligtingdeeltjies wat in ons brein geskep en gestoor word, maar dit is net ’n illusie. Alle deeltjies is inderwaarheid ewe belangrik. Ons brein maak ’n voorstelling van die werklikheid daar buite deur die inligting wat deur middel van ons sintuie waargeneem word te neem en in ’n ryk, digitale tapisserie te omskep. Maar ons persepsies is net ’n voorstelling – dit is nie die werklikheid nie, maar ’n illusie.

Dit was natuurlik ook die siening wat ek gehuldig het. Ek kan onthou dat ek tydens my mediese studies standpunte gehoor het dat die bewussyn niks meer is as ’n baie ingewikkelde rekenaarprogram nie. Volgens hierdie opvattings is die nagenoeg tien miljard neurone wat in die brein aktief is daartoe in staat om lewenslank ons bewussyn en geheue in stand te hou.

Om te begryp hoe die brein egter ons toegang tot kennis van die hoër wêrelde mag blokkeer, moet ons aanvaar – altans, hipoteties en net voorlopig – dat die brein self nie bewussyn skep nie. Dat dit eintlik ’n soort reduksieklep of filter is wat die groter, nieliggaamlike bewussyn wat ons in die nieliggaamlike wêrelde besit, afskaal tot ’n meer beperkte vermoë vir die duur van ons aardse bestaan. Hierdie hipotetiese funksionering van die brein sou uit twee verskillende perspektiewe vir die mens voordelig wees.

Uit die aardse perspektief hou dit ’n besliste voordeel in. Net soos ons brein elke wakker oomblik hard werk om die oorweldigende stortvloed van sintuiglike inligting uit ons fisiese omgewing te

verwerk, en die inligting te sif wat ons nodig het vir oorlewing, net so stel die opheffing van ons boaardse identiteit ons in staat om meer doeltreffend "hier en nou" aanwesig te wees. Net soos ons gewone lewe te veel inligting vir ons inhou om alles te kan inneem en verwerk én nog te kan funksioneer, so sou om uitermate bewus te wees van die ander wêrelde, ons funksionering selfs meer beperk. As ons nou te veel van die geestelike wêreld sou weet, sou die hantering van ons aardse bestaan 'n nog groter uitdaging wees as wat dit reeds is. (Dit beteken nie dat ons nie van die ander wêrelde moet bewus wees nie – net dat as ons hiperbewus sou wees van die grootheid daarvan, dan sou dit die uitvoering van ons aardse handelinge kortwiek.) Uit die perspektief van 'n doelgerigte heelal (en ek is oortuig dat die heelal by uitstek doelgerig is), sou die maak van goeie keuses wanneer ons met die bose en ongeregtigheid gekonfronteer word van veel minder betekenis wees as ons, terwyl ons nog hier is, die volle skoonheid en wonder van die wêreld wat op ons wag sou kon onthou.

Waarom is ek so seker hiervan? Daar is twee redes. Die eerste is dat dit aan my geopenbaar is (deur die wesens in die Poort en die Kern) en die tweede is dat ek dit self ervaar het. Terwyl ek buite my liggaam was, het ek kennis van die natuur en die struktuur van die heelal opgedoen wat ver bo my begrip was. Maar ek het dit nogtans opgedoen, grotendeels omdat my aardse bekommernisse nie in die weg daarvan gestaan het nie. Noudat ek terug is op aarde en ek my liggaamlike identiteit onthou, is die saadjie van boaardse kennis weer bedek. Maar dit is nog daar. Ek kan dit elke oomblik voel. Dit sal jare duur, in hierdie aardse omgewing, voordat dit wasdom bereik. Met ander woorde, dit sal jare verg om met my sterflike, stoflike brein te verstaan wat ek so onmiddellik en maklik in die breinvrye wêrelde verstaan het. Tog is ek vol vertroue dat ek met harde werk baie van daardie kennis sal kan ontsluit.

Sagkens gestel, bestaan daar 'n reusegaping tussen die huidige wetenskaplike begrip van die heelal en die waarheid soos ek dit sien. Ek is steeds 'n aanhanger van fisika en kosmologie, ek wil steeds ons groot en wonderlike heelal bestudeer. Maar ek het nou 'n breër begrip van wat "groot" en "wonderlik" werklik beteken. Die fisiese aspek van die heelal is 'n stofdeeltjie in vergelyking met die onsigbare en geestelike deel. Vantevore was "geestelik" nie 'n woord wat ek in 'n

wetenskaplike gesprek sou gebruik nie. Nou glo ek dit is ’n woord wat ons nie kan weglaat nie.

Vanuit die Kern het dit vir my gelyk asof daar duidelike verklarings is vir wat ons “donker energie” en “donker materie” noem, asook vir ander meer gevorderde aspekte van die samestelling van ons heelal wat die mens nog lank nie sal verstaan nie.

Dit beteken egter nie dat ek dit self kan verduidelik nie. Dit klink miskien soos ’n teenstrydigheid, maar ek is self nog in die proses om dit te verstaan. Miskien is die beste manier om daardie deel van my ervaring oor te dra om te sê dat ek ’n voorsmaak gehad het van ’n ander, groter soort kennis: waartoe ek glo al hoe meer mense in die toekoms toegang sal kry. Maar om nou daardie kennis oor te dra is byna soos wanneer ’n sjimpansee vir ’n dag lank ’n mens word en al die wonders van menslike kennis ervaar, en dan weer terugkeer na sy sjimpanseemaats en vir hulle probeer verduidelik hoe dit voel om verskillende tale te ken, en rekeningkunde te verstaan en wat die skaal van die sonnestelsel is.

Daar bo sou ’n vraag in my gedagtes opkom, en die antwoord sou gelyktydig opkom, soos ’n blom wat reg langsaan uitloop. Net soos fisiese partikels in die heelal nie werklik afsonderlik is van mekaar nie, so was daar nie ’n vraag sonder ’n gepaardgaande antwoord nie. Hierdie antwoorde was ook nie van die gewone “ja”- of “nee”-soort nie. Dit was ingewikkelde konseptuele konstruksies, reusebegripstrukture, komplekse gedagtestede. Konsepte van so ’n groot omvang dat dit my leeftye sou kos om dit te te snap as ek tot aardse denke beperk was. Maar ek was nie. Ek het daardie aardse manier van dink afgewerp, soos ’n vlinder wat uit ’n papie breek.

Ek het die aarde gesien as ’n ligblou kolletjie in die oneindige donkerte van die ruimte. Ek kon sien die aarde is ’n plek waar die goeie en die kwade meng, en dat dit een van die uitsonderlike kenmerke daarvan is. Selfs op aarde is daar veel meer goed as kwaad, maar die aarde is ’n plek waar die kwade toegelaat word om invloed uit te oefen op ’n manier wat op hoër bestaansvlakke heeltemal onmoontlik sou wees. Dat die bose soms die oorhand kry, word deur die Skepper toegelaat as ’n noodsaaklike gevolg van die gawe van vrye wil.

Klein deeltjies van die bose is regdeur die heelal teenwoordig, maar

die somtotaal van alle boosheid is soos ’n sandkorreltjie op ’n lang strand in vergelyking met al die goedheid, oorvloed, hoop en onvoorwaardelike liefde wat die heelal letterlik oorspoel. Die essensie van die ander dimensie is liefde en aanvaarding, en dit is onmiddellik en ooglopend duidelik dat enigiets wat nie hierdie eienskappe besit nie, nie daar hoort nie.

Maar saam met vrye wil kom die risiko dat ons hierdie liefde en aanvaarding kan verloor of daarvan afsterf. Ons is vry, maar ons is vrye wesens wat omring word deur ’n omgewing wat saamwerk om ons te laat voel dat ons nie vry is nie. Vrye wil is van kritieke belang vir ons funksie op aarde: ’n funksie wat, soos ons almal eendag sal agterkom, die hoër doel dien om ons opgang in die tydlose ander dimensie moontlik te maak. Ons lewe hier op aarde mag nietig lyk, want dit is mikroskopies klein in vergelyking met die ander lewens en wêrelde wat ook die onsigbare en sigbare heelalle volmaak. Maar ons lewe is ook van die allergrootste belang, want ons doel hier is om nader aan die Opperwese te groei, en daardie groeiproses word fyn dopgehou deur die wesens in die wêrelde daar bo – die siele en glansende sfere (die wesens wat ek aan die begin ver bokant my in die Poort gesien het, en wat ek glo die oorsprong is van ons kultuur se begrip van engele).

Ons – die geestelike wesens wat tydelik ons evolusionêr ontwikkelde sterflike breine en liggame bewoon – maak die ware keuses. Ware denke vind nie in die brein plaas nie. Maar ons is so gewoond daaraan om ons brein te assosieer met wat ons dink en wie ons is, dat ons nie besef ons is veel meer as die fisieke breine en liggame wat ons bevele gehoorsaam – of behoort te gehoorsaam nie.

Ware denke is buiteliggaamlik. Dit is die denke-agter-die-denke wat verantwoordelik is vir al die waarlik betekenisvolle keuses wat ons in die wêreld maak. Denke wat nie afhanklik is van lineêre deduksie nie, maar wat so vinnig soos weerlig beweeg, en op verskillende vlakke konneksies maak en hulle verbind. Teenoor hierdie vrye, innerlike intelligensie is ons gewone denke stadig en strompelend. Dit is hierdie denke wat die volmaakte kolhou slaan of die oorspronklike wetenskaplike insig voortbring of die meevoerende melodie skryf. Dit is die onderbewuste denke wat altyd daar is, wanneer ons dit regtig nodig het, maar alte dikwels het ons nie meer die vermoë om dit te

aktiveer of daarop te vertrou nie. Dit is die denke wat daardie aand met sonsondergang geaktiveer is toe Chuck se valskerm skielik reg onder my oopgegaan het.

Die ervaring van denke buite die brein kan beskryf word as ’n wêreld van oombliklike konneksies wat gewone denke (dit wil sê, dié aspekte wat deur die liggaamlike brein en die spoed van lig beperk word) soos ’n tydsame en trae proses laat lyk. Ons ware, diepste self is heeltemal vry. Dit word nie aan bande gelê deur dade uit die verlede nie en is nie gemoeid met identiteit of status nie. Die ware self verstaan dat dit nie die aardse wêreld hoef te vrees nie en dit word nie deur roem of rykdom of oorwinning bepaal nie.

Dit is die ware geestelike self wat ons elkeen eendag sal herwin. Maar tot daardie dag aanbreek, voel ek, moet ons alles in ons vermoë doen om met hierdie wonderbaarlike aspek van onsself in aanraking te kom – om dit te ontwikkel en na vore te bring. Dit is die wese wat in elkeen van ons lewe, en inderwaarheid die enigste wese wat God bedoel het ons moet wees.

Hoe beweeg ons nader aan hierdie ware geestelike self? Deur liefde en barmhartigheid uit te leef. Waarom? Omdat liefde en barmhartigheid veel meer is as blote abstrakte begrippe. Liefde en barmhartigheid is waar. Dit is konkreet. En dit is die essensie van die geestelike wêreld. Om na daardie wêreld te kan terugkeer, moet ons weer soos daardie wêreld word, al is ons in hierdie wêreld vasgevang.

Een van die grootste foute wat mense maak wanneer hulle aan God dink, is om aan ’n onpersoonlike God te dink. Ja, God word geopenbaar in die volmaakte heelal wat ons deur middel van die wetenskap probeer verstaan. Maar terselfdertyd is Om ook “menslik” – meer menslik as die mens self. Om het ’n inniger en persoonliker begrip en simpatie vir ons menslike situasie as wat ons ooit kan droom, want Om weet dat ons vergeet het, en verstaan hoe moeilik dit is om selfs net vir ’n oomblik te lewe met ons geheueverlies van die Opperwese.

16.

The Well

Holley first met our friend Sylvia in the 1980s, when both were teaching at the Ravenscroft School in Raleigh, North Carolina. While there, Holley was also a close friend of Susan Reintjes. Susan is an intuitive—a fact that never got in the way of my feelings about her. She was, to my mind, a very special person, even if what she did was, to say the least, outside my straight-and-narrow neurosurgical view. She was also a channel and had written a book called *Third Eye Open,* which Holley was a big fan of. One of the spiritual healing activities Susan regularly performed involved helping coma patients to heal by contacting them psychically. On Thursday, my fourth day in coma, Sylvia had the idea that Susan should try to contact me.

Sylvia called her at home in Chapel Hill and explained what was happening with me. Would it be possible for her to "tune in" to me? Susan said yes and asked for a few details about my illness. Sylvia gave her the basics: I'd been in a coma for four days and I was in critical condition.

"That's all I need to know," Susan said. "I'll try to contact him tonight."

According to Susan's view, a coma patient was a kind of in-between being. Neither completely here (the earthly realm) nor completely there (the spiritual realm), these patients often have a singularly mysterious atmosphere to them. This was, as I've mentioned, a phenomenon I'd noticed myself many times, though of course I'd never given it the supernatural credence that Susan had.

In Susan's experience, one of the qualities that set coma patients apart was their receptivity to telepathic communication. She was confident that once she'd put herself into a meditative state, she'd soon establish contact with me.

"Communicating with a coma patient," she later told me, "is a little like throwing a rope down a deep well. How deep the rope needs to go depends on the depth of the comatose state. When I tried to contact you, the first thing that surprised me was how deep the rope went. The farther down, the more frightened I became that you were too far away—that I wouldn't be able to reach you because you weren't

coming back."

After five full minutes of mentally descending via the telepathic "rope," she felt a slight shift, like a fishing line deep down in the water getting a small but definite tug.

"I was sure it was you," she told me later, "and I told Holley as much. I told her it wasn't your time yet, and that your body would know what to do. I suggested that Holley keep those two thoughts in mind, and repeat them to you at your bedside."

16.

’n Diep Put

Holley en ons vriendin Sylvia het mekaar in die 1980’s ontmoet, toe hulle albei by Ravenscroft School in Raleigh, Noord-Carolina, skoolgehou het. Holley was destyds ook ’n goeie vriendin van Susan Reintjes. Susan is ’n psigiese berader en geneser, ’n feit wat nie my houding teenoor haar as mens beïnvloed het nie. Sy was altyd vir my ’n baie spesiale persoon, al het haar benadering nie met my streng wetenskaplike siening as neurochirurg gestrook nie. Sy is ook ’n psigiese kanaal en het ’n boek geskryf, *Third Eye Open*, wat Holley nogal hoog aangeskryf het. As psigiese geneser probeer Susan soms komapasiënte help deur psigies met hulle te probeer kontak maak.

Donderdag, my vierde dag in koma, kry Sylvia die ingewing dat Susan moet probeer om met my kontak te maak. Sylvia bel Susan by haar huis in Chapel Hill en vertel haar wat met my aan die gang is. Sou dit vir haar moontlik wees om met my in verbinding te tree? Susan willig in en vra uit oor my siekte. Sylvia gee haar die basiese inligting: Ek is al vier dae lank in ’n koma en in ’n kritieke toestand.

“Dis al wat ek hoef te weet,” sê Susan. “Ek sal vanaand probeer om met hom kontak te maak.”

Volgens Susan se siening is ’n komapasiënt ’n soort tussenwese, nie heeltemal hier in die aardse wêreld nie, maar ook nie heeltemal daar in die geestelike wêreld nie, en hulle word dikwels deur ’n vreemde en geheimsinnige aura omring. Soos ek reeds genoem het, het ek dit self dikwels in die verlede opgemerk, hoewel ek nie dieselfde bonatuurlike betekenis daaraan geheg het as Susan nie.

Uit Susan se ervaring word komapasiënte gekenmerk deur hulle ontvanklikheid vir telepatiese kommunikasie. Sy was vol vertroue dat sy gou met my sou kontak maak, sodra sy self in ’n meditatiewe toestand kon gaan.

“Om met ’n komapasiënt te kommunikeer,” het sy my later vertel, “is soos om ’n tou in ’n diep put te laat afsak. Die lengte van die tou

hang af van hoe diep die komateuse toestand is. Toe ek met jou probeer kontak maak het, was ek verbaas oor hoe diep ek die tou moes laat afsak. Hoe dieper die tou afgesak het, hoe meer bekommerd het ek geraak dat jy te ver weg was – dat ek jou nie sou kon bereik nie, omdat jy nie sou terugkom nie."

Nadat sy 'n volle vyf minute lank daarop gekonsentreer het om telepaties kontak te maak, het sy 'n effense reaksie gevoel, as 't ware asof daar iewers in die dieptes 'n ligte plukkie aan die tou is.

"Ek was oortuig dat dit jy is," het sy later vertel, "En ek het dit vir Holley gesê. Ek het vir haar gesê dit is nog nie jou tyd om te gaan nie, en dat jou liggaam sou weet wat om te doen. Ek het aan Holley voorgestel dat sy op daardie twee gedagtes konsentreer en dit gedurig langs jou bed vir jou moet herhaal."

17.

N of 1

It was Thursday when my doctors determined that my particular strain of *E. coli* didn't match the ultraresistant strain that, unaccountably, had shown up in Israel just at the time I'd been there. But the fact that it didn't match only made my case more confounding. While it was certainly good news that I was not harboring a strain of bacteria that could wipe out a third of the country, in terms of my own, individual recovery, it just underscored what my doctors were already suspecting all too clearly: that my case was essentially without precedent.

It was also quickly moving from desperate to hopeless. The doctors simply didn't have an answer for how I could have contracted my illness, or how I could be brought back from my coma. They were sure of only one thing: they did not know of anyone making a full recovery from bacterial meningitis after being comatose for more than a few days. We were now into day four.

The stress took its toll on everyone. Phyllis and Betsy had decided on Tuesday that any talk of the possibility of my dying would be forbidden in my presence, under the assumption that some part of me might be aware of the discussion. Early Thursday morning, Jean asked one of the nurses in the ICU room about my chances of survival. Betsy, on the other side of my bed, heard her and said: "*Please* don't have that conversation in this room."

Jean and I had always been extremely close. We were part of the family just like our "homegrown" siblings, but the fact that we were "chosen" by mom and dad, as they put it, inevitably gave us a special bond. She had always watched out for me, and her frustration at her powerlessness over the current situation brought her close to a breaking point.

Tears came to Jean's eyes. "I need to go home for a while," she said.

After determining that there were plenty of people to continue my bedside vigil, all agreed that the nursing staff would probably be delighted to have one less person in my room.

Jean went back to our home, packed her bags, and drove home to

Delaware that afternoon. By leaving, she gave the first real outward expression to an emotion the whole family was starting to feel: powerlessness. There are few experiences more frustrating than seeing a loved one in a comatose state. You want to help, but you can't. You want the person to open his or her eyes, but they don't. Families of coma patients often resort to opening the patient's eyes themselves. It's a way of forcing the issue—of ordering the patient to wake up. Of course it doesn't work, and it can also further damage morale. Patients in deep coma lose the coordination of their eyes and pupils. Open the lids of a deep coma patient, and you're likely to find one eye pointing in one direction, the other in the opposite. It's an unnerving sight, and it added further to Holley's pain several times that week when she pried my eyelids open and saw, in essence, the askew eyeballs of a corpse.

With Jean gone, things really started to fray. Phyllis now began to exhibit a behavior I'd also seen countless times among patients' family members in my own practice. She started to become frustrated with my doctors.

"Why aren't they giving us more information?" she asked Betsy, outraged. "I swear, if Eben were here, *he* would tell us what's really going on."

The fact was that my doctors were doing absolutely everything they could do for me. Phyllis, of course, knew this. But the pain and frustration of the situation were simply wearing away at my loved ones.

On Tuesday, Holley had called Dr. Jay Loeffler, my former partner in developing the stereotactic radiosurgery program at the Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston. Jay was then the chairman of radiation oncology at Massachusetts General Hospital, and Holley figured he'd be in as good a position as anyone to give her some answers.

As Holley described my situation, Jay assumed she must have been getting the details of my case wrong. What she was describing to him was, he knew, essentially impossible. But once Holley finally had him convinced that I really was in a coma caused by a rare case of *E. coli* bacterial meningitis that no one could explain the origins of, he got started calling infectious disease experts around the country. No one he spoke to had heard of a case like mine. Going over the medical literature back to 1991, he couldn't find a single case of *E. coli* meningitis in an adult who hadn't recently been through a neurosurgical procedure.

From Tuesday on, Jay called at least once a day to get an update from Phyllis or Holley and give them feedback on what his investigations had revealed. Steve Tatter, another good friend and neurosurgeon, likewise provided daily calls offering advice and comfort. But day after day, the only revelation was that my situation was the first of its kind in medical history. Spontaneous *E. coli* bacterial meningitis is rare in adults. Less than 1 in 10 million of the world's population contracts it annually. And, like all varieties of gram-negative bacterial meningitis, it's highly aggressive. So aggressive that of the people it does attack, more than 90 percent of those who initially suffer from a rapid neurologic decline, as I did, die. And that was the mortality rate when I first entered the ER. That dismal 90 percent crept toward 100 percent as the week wore on and my body failed to respond to the antibiotics. The few who survive a case as severe as mine generally require round-the-clock care for the rest of their lives. Officially, my status was "N of 1," a term that refers to medical studies in which a single patient stands for the entire trial. There is simply no one else to whom the doctors could compare my case.

Beginning on Wednesday, Holley brought Bond in for a visit every afternoon after school. But by Friday she was starting to wonder if these visits were doing more harm than good. At times, early in the week, I would move. My body would thrash around wildly. A nurse would rub my head and give me more sedation, and eventually I'd become quiet again. This was confusing and painful for my ten-year-old son to watch. It was bad enough that he was looking at a body that no longer resembled his father, but also seeing that body make mechanical movements that he didn't recognize as mine was particularly challenging. Day by day, I became less the person he'd known, and more an unrecognizable body in a bed: a cruel and alien twin of the father he once knew.

By the end of the week these occasional bursts of motor activity had all but ceased. I needed no more sedation, because movement—even the dead, automatic kind initiated by the most primitive reflex loops of my lower brainstem and spinal cord—had dwindled almost to nil.

More family members and friends were calling, asking if they should come. By Thursday, it had been decided that they shouldn't. There was already too much commotion in my ICU room. The nurses suggested strongly that my brain needed rest—the quieter, the better.

There was also a noticeable change in the tone of these phone calls. They too were shifting subtly from the hopeful to the hopeless. At times, looking around, Holley felt like she had lost me already.

On Thursday afternoon, Michael Sullivan got a knock on his door. It was his secretary at St. John's Episcopal Church.

"The hospital is on the line," she said. "One of the nurses taking care of Eben needs to speak with you. She says it's urgent."

Michael picked up the phone.

"Michael," the nurse told him, "you need to come right away. Eben is dying."

As a pastor, Michael had been in this situation before. Pastors see death and the wreckage it leaves behind almost as often as doctors do. Still, Michael was shocked to hear the actual word "dying" said in reference to me. He called his wife, Page, and asked her to pray: both for me, and for the strength on his part to rise to the occasion. Then he drove through the cold steady rain to the hospital, struggling to see through the tears filling his eyes.

When he got to my room the scene was much the same as it had been the last time he had visited. Phyllis was sitting by my side, taking her shift in the vigil of holding my hand that had been going on without a break since her arrival on Monday night. My chest rose and fell twelve times a minute with the ventilator, and the ICU nurse went quietly about her routine, orbiting among the machines that surrounded my bed and noting their readouts.

Another nurse came in, and Michael asked if she'd been the one who called his assistant.

"No," she replied. "I've been here all morning, and his condition has not changed much from last night. I don't know who called you."

By eleven, Holley, Mom, Phyllis, and Betsy were all in my room. Michael suggested a prayer. Everyone, including the two nurses, joined hands around the bed, and Michael made one more heartfelt plea for my return to health.

"Lord, bring Eben back to us. I know it's in your power."

Still, no one knew who had called Michael. But whoever it was, it's a good thing they did. Because the prayers coming to me from the world below—the world I'd started out from—were finally starting to get through.

17.

N van 1

Donderdag word bevestig dat my *E. coli*-infeksie ’n ander stam is as die ultra-weerstandige stam wat toevallig in Israel voorgekom het in die tyd dat ek daar was. Die feit dat dit nie dieselfde stam is nie, maak my toestand net meer onverklaarbaar. Aan die een kant is dit goeie nuus dat ek nie ’n bakteriële infeksie het wat ’n derde van die land se bevolking kan uitwis nie. Maar wat my toestand betref, is my dokters se vermoedens nou bevestig: My geval is sonder presedent.

My toestand versleg nou vinnig van desperaat tot hopeloos. Die dokters het geen idee hoe ek die siekte opgedoen het of hoe ek uit die koma gebring kan word nie. Een ding weet hulle wel: Die kanse op volkome herstel ná ’n koma van meer as ’n paar dae is uiters skraal. Ons is nou by dag vier.

Die spanning begin nou sy tol eis. Phyllis en Betsy het Dinsdag reeds besluit dat niemand in my teenwoordigheid oor my moontlike sterfte mag praat nie, ingeval ’n deel van my tog bewus kan wees van die gesprek. Vroeg Donderdagoggend vra Jean een van die verpleegsters uit oor my kanse op herstel. Betsy, aan die ander kant van die bed, hoor dit en sê, “Moet *asseblief* nie in hierdie kamer daaroor praat nie.”

Ek en Jean was nog altyd baie na aan mekaar. Ons was net so veel deel van die gesin as ons ouers se biologiese kinders, maar die feit dat ons twee deur ons ouers “gekies” is, soos hulle dit gestel het, het ’n spesiale band tussen ons geskep. Sy het altyd ’n ogie oor my gehou, en haar frustrasie oor hoe magteloos sy in die situasie was, het haar naby breekpunt gebring.

Jean se oë skiet vol trane. “Ek dink ek moet eers bietjie huis toe gaan.” Hulle bespreek die saak en besluit daar is genoeg mense om by my bed te waak, en dat die verpleegpersoneel dit waarskynlik sou verwelkom as daar een minder in die kamer is.

Jean gaan terug na ons huis toe, pak in en ry nog dieselfde middag na haar huis toe in Delaware. Deur weg te gaan gee sy die eerste

duidelike teken van hoe almal in die familie begin voel: magteloos. Daar is min dinge wat meer frustrerend is as om ’n geliefde persoon in ’n komateuse toestand te sien. Jy wil graag help, maar jy kan nie. Jy wil hê die persoon moet sy of haar oë oopmaak, maar dit gebeur nie. Mense probeer soms om dinge vooruit te loop en self die pasiënt se oë oop te maak. Dit kan natuurlik nie werk nie, en dit is ook nadelig vir almal se gemoedstemming. Pasiënte wat in ’n diep koma is, het nie beheer oor hulle oë en pupille nie. As mens so ’n pasiënt se oë oopdwing, mag jy vind dat die oë in verskillende rigtings kyk. Dit is ’n ontstellende gesig, en dit het verskeie kere gedurende dié week tot Holley se ontsteltenis bygedra toe sy my ooglede oopgedruk en die skewe oë gesien het, soos dié van ’n lyk.

Ná Jean se vertrek hoop die spanning verder op. Phyllis begin nou gedrag openbaar wat ek dikwels by familie van pasiënte ervaar het. Sy begin ontevrede raak met my dokters.

“Waarom gee hulle ons nie meer inligting nie?” vra sy met groot verontwaardiging vir Betsy. “Ek is seker as Eben hier was, sou hy vir ons gesê het wat aan die gang is.” Inderwaarheid het my dokters alles vir my gedoen wat hulle kon. Phyllis het dit natuurlik geweet. Maar die pyn en frustrasie het net vir almal te veel geraak.

Dinsdag het Holley dr Jay Loeffler gebel, my voormalige vennoot in die stereotaktiese radiochirurgieprogram by Brigham & Women’s Hospital in Boston. Jay was toe die voorsitter van bestralingsonkologie by Massachusetts General Hospital, en Holley was vol vertroue dat hy in staat sou wees om vir haar ’n paar antwoorde te gee.

Volgens Holley se beskrywing van my situasie het Jay aanvaar dat sy haar misgis oor die feite van die saak. Wat sy beskryf, het hy geweet, is basies onmoontlik. Maar toe Holley hom eindelik oortuig dat ek regtig in ’n koma is, veroorsaak deur ’n uitsonderlike *E. coli* bakteriële meningitis waarvan die oorsprong onbekend is, het hy begin om kenners van aansteeklike siektes regoor die land te bel. Niemand met wie hy gepraat het, het al ooit so ’n geval teëgekom nie. Hy het die mediese literatuur nagegaan tot 1991 en kon geen geval opspoor van *E. coli*-meningitis in ’n volwassene wat nie onlangs ’n neurochirurgiese prosedure ondergaan het nie.

Hy het minstens een maal per dag gebel om te hoor hoe dit gaan en aan Phyllis of Holley terugvoering te gee oor wat hy kon uitvind.

Steve Tatter, nog ’n vriend en neurochirurg, het ook elke dag met raad en ondersteuning gebel. Maar elke dag kon hulle maar net bevestig dat my situasie uniek was in die mediese geskiedenis. Spontane *E. coli* bakteriële meningitis is uiters seldsaam onder volwassenes. Minder as 1 uit 10 miljoen van die wêreld se bevolking kry dit per jaar. Soos alle variëteite van Gram-negatiewe meningitis is dit uiters aggressief. Trouens, 90 persent van dié pasiënte wat aanvanklik ’n vinnige neurologiese agteruitgang toon, soos in my geval, sterf uiteindelik. Dit was die sterfterisiko toe ek by die noodeenheid toegelaat is, en dit het in die loop van die week gestyg tot 100 persent, terwyl my liggaam nie op die antibiotika gereageer het nie. Pasiënte wat wel van so ’n ernstige aanval herstel, het gewoonlik die res van hulle lewe voltydse versorging nodig. Amptelik was my status “N van 1”, ’n term wat in kliniese studies verwys na een pasiënt wat die hele studiegroep verteenwoordig. Daar was niemand met wie dokters my geval kon vergelyk nie.

Ná Woensdag het Holley elke dag vir Bond gebring om my te besoek. Maar teen Vrydag begin sy wonder of dit nie meer kwaad as goed doen nie. Aan die begin van die week het ek soms beweeg. My ledemate sou wild heen en weer ruk. ’n Verpleegster sou dan my kop vryf en meer sedasie aan my toedien, en dan sou ek bedaar. Dit was vir my seun verwarrend en pynlik om dit te sien. Dit was al erg genoeg dat die liggaam in die hospitaalbed glad nie meer soos sy pa lyk nie, maar die meganiese bewegings was veral moeilik om te aanskou. Ek het al hoe minder gelyk soos die pa wat hy geken het, en al hoe meer soos ’n vreemdeling.

Teen die einde van die week het hierdie motoriese bewegings ook opgehou. Ek het nie meer sedasie nodig gehad nie, want daar was geen beweging meer nie, nie eens die outomatiese bewegings wat deur die primitiewe reflekse van die breinstam en rugmurg veroorsaak word nie.

Al hoe meer vriende en familie het gebel en gevra of hulle moet kom. Teen Donderdag is die besluit geneem dat hulle liewer moet wegbly. Daar was reeds te veel aktiwiteit in my intensiewesorgkamer. Die verpleegpersoneel het sterk gevoel dat my brein moet rus – hoe stiller die omgewing, hoe beter.

Die trant van die telefoonoproepe het ook geleidelik verander, van

hoopvol tot moedeloos. Holley het naderhand begin voel dat sy my klaar verloor het.

Donderdagmiddag is daar ’n klop aan Michael Sullivan se kantoordeur. Dit is sy sekretaresse by die St John’s Episkopaalse Kerk.

“Dis die hospitaal,” sê sy. “Een van die verpleegsters wat na Eben omsien wil met jou praat. Sy sê dis dringend.”

Michael tel die gehoorbuis op.

“Michael,” sê die verpleegster, “jy moet dadelik kom, Eben is op sterwe.”

As ’n pastoor was Michael al voorheen in hierdie situasie. Predikante moet net so dikwels soos dokters die dood en die gevolge daarvan hanteer. Tog was Michael geskok om dié woorde te hoor. Hy bel sy vrou, Page, en vra haar om te bid: vir my, en vir krag vir hom om die situasie te kan hanteer. Toe ry hy deur die koue deurdringende reën hospitaal toe, terwyl die trane in sy oë opwel.

Toe hy by my kamer aankom, lyk dinge nie veel anders as die vorige keer dat hy daar was nie. Phyllis sit langs my bed en hou my hand vas – dit is haar beurt om by my te waak. My borskas gaan ritmies op en neer, twaalf keer per minuut danksy die ventilator, en die suster gaan rustig voort met haar intensiewesorgroetine en lees die resultate af van die masjiene om my bed. Nog ’n verpleegster kom binne en Michael vra of dit sy is wat gebel het.

“Nee,” antwoord sy. “Ek is al heeloggend hier, en sy toestand het nie veel verander sedert gisteraand nie. Ek weet nie wie gebel het nie.”

Teen elfuur is Holley, my ma, Phyllis en Betsy almal in my kamer. Michael stel ’n gebed voor en hulle vorm ’n sirkel om die bed, hou hande vas. Michael lewer ’n innige pleidooi dat ek weer sal gesond word.

“Here, bring Eben weer terug na ons toe. Ons weet dit is in u mag.”

Niemand weet wie vir Michael gebel het nie. Maar wie dit ook al was, dit was ’n goeie ding, want die gebede wat van die wêreld daar onder na my toe gekom het – van die wêreld waar ek vandaan kom – het na my begin deurkom.

18.

To Forget, and to Remember

My awareness was larger now. So large, it seemed to take in the entire universe. Have you ever listened to a song on a static-filled radio station? You get used to it. Then someone adjusts the dial and you hear the same song in its full clarity. How could you have failed to notice how dim, how far away, how entirely untrue to the original it was before?

Of course, that's how the mind works. Humans are built to adapt. I'd explained to my patients many times that this or that discomfort would lessen, or at least seem to lessen, as their bodies and brains adapted to the new situation. Something goes on long enough, and your brain learns to ignore it, or work around it, or just to treat it as normal.

But our limited earthly consciousness is far from simply normal, and I was getting my first illustration of this as I traveled ever deeper, to the very heart of the Core. I still remembered nothing of my earthly past, and yet I was not the less for this. Even though I'd forgotten my life down here, I had remembered who I really and truly was out there. I was a citizen of a universe staggering in its vastness and complexity, and ruled entirely by love.

In an almost eerie way, my discoveries beyond the body echoed the lessons I had learned just a year earlier through reconnecting with my birth family. Ultimately, none of us are orphans. We are all in the position I was, in that we have *other family:* beings who are watching and looking out for us—beings we have momentarily forgotten, but who, if we open ourselves to their presence, are waiting to help us navigate our time here on earth. None of us are ever unloved. Each and every one of us is deeply known and cared for by a Creator who cherishes us beyond any ability we have to comprehend. That knowledge must no longer remain a secret.

18.

Om te Vergeet, en te Onthou

My bewussyn was nou groter. So groot, asof dit die heelal vul. Het jy al ooit na ’n liedjie geluister met radiosteuring op die agtergrond? Mens raak gewoond daaraan. Dan stel iemand die stasie in en jy hoor die liedjie helder en duidelik. Hoe kon jy vantevore nie besef het hoe dof en vaag, hoe ontrou aan die oorspronklike dit was nie?

Dit is natuurlik hoe die brein werk. Die mens is aanpasbaar. Ek het al dikwels aan pasiënte verduidelik dat een of ander pyn of ongemak sal minder word, of oënskynlik minder word, namate hulle brein en liggaam by die nuwe situasie aanpas. As ’n toestand lank genoeg voortduur, leer jou brein om dit te ignoreer, of daarvoor te kompenseer, of dit as normaal te beskou.

Maar ons beperkte aardse bewussyn is ver van normaal, en dié feit het vir my duidelik geword terwyl ek al hoe dieper, tot by die Kern, gereis het. Ek het nog steeds niks onthou van my aardse verlede nie, maar dit het my nie ’n mindere wese gemaak nie. Selfs al het ek my lewe op aarde vergeet, het ek onthou wie ek waarlik daar bo is. Ek was ’n bewoner van ’n heelal wat onmeetbaar groot en kompleks is, en geheel en al deur liefde beheer word.

Op ’n vreemde manier was my gewaarwordinge buite my liggaam ’n bevestiging van die lesse wat ek skaars ’n jaar vantevore geleer het deur weer met my biologiese familie kontak te maak. Uiteindelik is niemand ’n weeskind nie. Ons het almal ander familie: wesens wat ’n ogie oor ons hou – wesens wat ons tydelik vergeet het, maar wat gereed is om ons te help om ons tyd hier op aarde te bestuur. Niemand is liefde onwaardig nie. Daar is ’n Skepper wat elkeen van ons ken en koester en vir ons sorg op ’n wyse wat ver bo ons begripsvermoë is. Hierdie waarheid moet nie langer ’n geheim bly nie.

19.

Nowhere to Hide

By Friday, my body had been on triple intravenous antibiotics for four full days but still wasn't responding. Family and friends had come from all over, and those who hadn't come had initiated prayer groups at their churches. My sister-in-law Peggy and Holley's close friend Sylvia arrived that afternoon. Holley greeted them with as cheerful a face as she could muster. Betsy and Phyllis continued to champion the *he's-going-to-be-fine* view: to remain positive at all costs. But each day it got harder to believe. Even Betsy herself began to wonder if her *no negativity in the room* order really meant something more like *no reality in the room*.

"Do you think Eben would do this for us, if the roles were reversed?" Phyllis asked Betsy that morning, after another largely sleepless night.

"What do you mean?" asked Betsy.

"I mean do you think he'd be spending every minute with us, camping out in the ICU?"

Betsy had the most beautiful, simple answer, delivered as a question: "Is there anywhere else in the world where you can imagine being?"

Both agreed that though I'd have been there in a second if needed, it was very, very hard to imagine me just sitting in one place for hours on end. "It never felt like a chore or something that had to be done—it was where we belonged," Phyllis told me later.

What was upsetting Sylvia the most were my hands and feet, which were beginning to curl up, like leaves on a plant without water. This is normal with victims of stroke and coma, as the dominant muscles in the extremities start to contract. But it's never easy for family and loved ones to see. Looking at me, Sylvia kept telling herself to stay with her original gut feeling. But even for her, it was getting very, very hard.

Holley had taken to blaming herself more and more (if only she had walked up the stairs sooner, if only this, if only that . . .) and everyone worked especially hard to keep her away from the subject.

By now, everyone knew that even if I did make a recovery, *recovery*

wasn't much of a word for what it would amount to. I'd need at least three months of intensive rehabilitation, would have chronic speech problems (if I had enough brain capacity to be able to speak at all), and I'd require chronic nursing care for the rest of my life. This was the best-case scenario, and as low and grim as that sounds, it was essentially in the realm of fantasy anyhow. The odds that I'd even be in that good of a shape were shrinking to nonexistent.

Bond had been kept from hearing the full details of my condition. But on Friday, at the hospital after school, he overheard one of my doctors outlining to Holley what she already knew.

It was time to face the facts. There was little room for hope.

That evening, when it was time for him to go home, Bond refused to leave my room. The regular drill was to allow only two people in my room at a time so that the doctors and nurses could work. Around six o'clock, Holley gently suggested that it was time to go home for the evening. But Bond wouldn't get up from his chair, just beneath his drawing of the battle between the white blood cell soldiers and the invading *E. coli* troops.

"He doesn't know I'm here anyway," Bond said, in a tone half bitter and half pleading. "Why can't I just stay?"

So for the rest of the evening everyone took turns coming in one at a time so Bond could stay where he was.

But the next morning—Saturday—Bond reversed his position. For the first time that week, when Holley stuck her head into his room to rouse him, he told her he didn't want to go to the hospital.

"Why not?" Holley asked.

"Because," Bond said, "I'm scared."

It was an admission that spoke for everyone.

Holley went back down to the kitchen for a few minutes. Then she tried again, asking him if he was sure he didn't want to go see his daddy.

There was a long pause as he stared at her.

"Okay," he agreed, finally.

Saturday passed with the ongoing vigil around my bed and the hopeful conversations between family and doctors. It all seemed like a half-hearted attempt to keep hope alive. Everyone's reserves were more empty than they'd been the day before.

On Saturday night, after taking our mother, Betty, back to her hotel room, Phyllis stopped by our house. It was pitch dark, with not a light in a window, and as she slogged through the soaking mud it was hard

for her to keep to the flagstones. By now it had been raining for five days straight, ever since the afternoon of my entrance into the ICU. Relentless rain like this was very unusual for the highlands of Virginia, where in November it is usually crisp, clear, and sunny, like the previous Sunday, the last day before my attack. Now that day seemed so long ago, and it felt like the sky had *always* been spewing rain. When would it ever stop?

Phyllis unlocked the door and switched on the lights. Since the beginning of the week, people had been coming by and dropping off food, and though the food was still coming in, the half-hopeful/half-worried atmosphere of rallying for a temporary emergency had turned darker and more desperate. Our friends, like our family, knew that the time of any hope for me at all was nearing its end.

For a second, Phyllis thought of lighting a fire, but right on the heels of that thought came another, unwelcome one. *Why bother?* She suddenly felt more exhausted and depressed than she could ever remember feeling. She lay down on the couch in the wood-paneled study and fell into a deep sleep.

Half an hour later, Sylvia and Peggy returned, tiptoeing by the study when they saw Phyllis collapsed there. Sylvia went down to the basement and found that someone had left the freezer door open. Water was forming a puddle on the floor, and the food was starting to thaw, including several nice steaks.

When Sylvia reported the basement flood situation to Peggy, they decided to make the most of it. They made calls to the rest of the family and a few friends and got to work. Peggy went out and picked up some more side dishes, and they whipped up an impromptu feast. Soon Betsy, her daughter Kate, and her husband, Robbie, joined them, along with Bond. There was a lot of nervous chatter, and a lot of dancing around the subject on everyone's mind: that I—the absent guest of honor—would most likely never return to this house again.

Holley had returned to the hospital to continue the endless vigil. She sat by my bed, holding my hand, and kept repeating the mantras suggested by Susan Reintjes, forcing herself to stay with the meaning of the words as she said them and to believe in her heart that they were true.

"Receive the prayers.

"You have healed others. Now is your time to be healed.

"You are loved by many.

"Your body knows what to do. It is not yet your time to die."

19.

Hoop Vervaag

Teen Vrydag was my liggaam al vier volle dae lank op drie binneaarse antibiotika, met geen teken van verbetering nie. Familie en vriende het van heinde en ver gekom, of by hulle kerke gebedsgroepe begin.

Betsy en Phyllis handhaaf steeds die positiewe benadering: *Hy sal weer gesond word*. Maar dit raak elke dag moeiliker om dit te glo. Selfs Betsy begin wonder of haar reël van *Geen negatiwiteit in die kamer* nie eerder beteken *Geen realiteit in die kamer* nie.

"Dink jy Eben sou dieselfde vir ons gedoen het, as die situasie omgekeerd was?" vra Phyllis Vrydagoggend vir Betsy ná nog 'n slapelose nag.

"Wat bedoel jy?"

"Ek bedoel, sou hy elke minuut langs jou of my bed in intensiewe sorg gewaak het?"

Betsy se pragtige en eenvoudige antwoord kom in die vorm van 'n vraag: "Is daar enige ander plek op aarde waar jy moontlik sou wou wees?"

Hulle stem saam dat ek binne minute daar sou wees indien nodig, maar dat hulle hulle kwalik kan voorstel dat ek ure lank op een plek sou kon sit. "Dit het nie vir 'n oomblik gevoel soos 'n straf of 'n verpligting nie – dit was waar ons gehoort het," het Phyllis later vir my gesê.

My skoonsuster Peggy en Sylvia kom die middag by die hospitaal aan. Holley probeer haar bes om 'n moedige front voor te hou. Wat vir Sylvia die meeste ontstel, is dat my hande en voete begin omkrul het, soos blare aan 'n plant wat nie genoeg water kry nie. Dit is 'n normale verskynsel by slagoffers van beroerte en koma, omdat die dominante spiere in die ledemate begin saamtrek. Maar dit is nie 'n mooi gesig vir geliefdes en vriende nie. Sylvia kyk na my en hou aan vir haarself sê dat sy moet bly glo dat ek sal gesond word, maar selfs vir haar is dit nou baie moeilik.

Holley het haarself al hoe meer begin kwalik neem (as sy net gouer kom kyk het, as sy net dit, as sy net dat …) en almal het hard probeer om haar gedagtes van hierdie onderwerp af te lei. Maar teen dié tyd het almal besef dat selfs al sou ek herstel, dit nie veel van ’n herstel sou wees nie. Ek sou minstens drie maande lank intensiewe rehabilitasie moes ondergaan, ek sou chroniese spraakprobleme hê (as ek hoegenaamd genoeg breinfunksie sou hê om te kan praat) en ek sou vir die res van my lewe voltydse verpleging benodig. Dit was die beste verwagte uitkoms, en selfs dit was geheel en al onrealisties. Die kanse op enige herstel was op pad na nul.

Die volle besonderhede van my toestand is aanvanklik van Bond weerhou. Maar Vrydagmiddag ná skool hoor hy dat een van die dokters vir Holley vertel wat sy klaar weet: Dit is tyd om die feite onder oë te sien. Daar is eintlik geen hoop meer nie.

Daardie aand, toe dit tyd word dat Bond moet huis toe gaan, weier hy om my te verlaat. Die gewone roetine was dat daar net twee mense op ’n slag in my kamer moet wees, sodat die verpleegpersoneel kan werk. Sesuur sê Holley saggies vir Bond dat dit nou tyd is om huis toe te gaan. Maar hy bly sit in sy stoel, net onder die tekening van die veldslag tussen die witbloedsel-soldate en die invallende *E. coli*-troepe.

“Pa weet tog nie eens dat ek hier is nie,” sê Bond in ’n half bitter, half pleitende stem. “Hoekom kan ek nie net hier bly nie?”

Die res van die aand maak die ander beurte om in te kom, sodat Bond kan bly sit.

Maar die volgende oggend – Saterdag – toe Holley hom wakker maak om weer hospitaal toe te gaan, wil hy nie.

“Waarom nie?” wil Holley weet.

“Want,” sê Bond, “ek is bang.”

Dit was ’n erkenning namens almal.

Holley gaan kombuis toe en laat hom ’n rukkie alleen. Toe probeer sy weer, en vra hom of hy seker is dat hy nie sy pa wil gaan sien nie.

Hy kyk haar ’n lang ruk aan.

“Oukei,” sê hy uiteindelik.

Saterdag gaan die waak langs my bed voort, asook hoopvolle gesprekke tussen die familie en die dokters. Die pogings om hoop lewend te hou, is egter maar flou. Almal se reserwes raak min.

Saterdagaand neem Phyllis my ma, Betty, terug na haar hotelkamer

en hou dan by ons huis stil. Dit is pikdonker, al die ligte is af, en op pad voordeur toe sukkel sy om uit die modder en op die paadjie te bly. Dit reën nou al vyf dae lank, vandat ek by die hospitaal toegelaat is. Sulke onophoudelike reën is heel ongewoon vir die hooglande van Virginië. In November is dit gewoonlik helder en koel, soos die vorige Sondag, die laaste dag voor my toeval. Daardie dag voel nou so lank gelede, en dit is asof die reën al ’n ewigheid lank uit die hemel stroom. Wanneer hou dit op?

Phyllis sluit die deur oop en skakel die ligte aan. Van die begin van die week af dra mense kos aan, en hoewel hulle nog steeds kos bring, het die atmosfeer nou verander. Dit is nie meer ’n half bekommerde, half moedige poging om ’n tydelike krisis te hanteer nie – dit raak nou meer gedemp en meer desperaat. Ons familie en vriende weet nou dat daar nie meer veel hoop vir my is nie.

Phyllis oorweeg dit ’n oomblik lank om ’n vuur aan te steek, en toe dink sy weer, waarvoor? Sy voel skielik uitgeput en neerslagtig, soos nog nooit tevore nie. Sy gaan lê op die bank in die studeerkamer en raak aan die slaap.

’n Halfuur later kom Sylvia en Peggy terug en loop saggies op hulle tone verby die studeerkamer toe hulle vir Phyllis daar sien lê. Sylvia gaan af na die kelder toe en sien iemand het die vrieskas se deur laat oopstaan. Daar is al ’n plas water op die vloer en die kos het begin ontdooi, onder meer ’n paar lekker stukke steak.

Toe Sylvia die nuus aan Peggy oordra, besluit hulle om die beste van ’n slegte saak te maak. Hulle bel die res van die familie en ’n paar vriende en spring aan die werk. Peggy gaan uit om nog bykosse te kry en binne ’n ommesientjie is daar ’n heerlike feesmaal. Betsy en haar dogter, Kate, en haar man, Robbie, sluit by hulle aan, saam met Bond. Daar word heelwat geklets, en bolangs gepraat oor die onderwerp waaraan almal dink – dat ek, die afwesige eregas – waarskynlik nooit weer na hierdie huis toe sal terugkeer nie.

Holley is intussen terug hospitaal toe om die eindelose waak voort te sit. Sy sit by my bed, hou my hand vas en herhaal die boodskap wat Susan Reintjes voorgestel het, dwing haarself om die die woorde met oorgawe te sê en in haar hart te glo dat dit waar is.

“Ontvang ons gebede.

“Jy het ander genees. Nou is dit jou beurt om genees te word.

“Baie mense het jou lief.

“Jou liggaam weet wat om te doen. Dit is nog nie jou tyd om te sterf nie.”

20.

The Closing

Each time I found myself stuck again in the coarse Earthworm's-Eye View, I was able to remember the brilliant Spinning Melody, which opened the portal back to the Gateway and the Core. I spent great stretches of time—which paradoxically felt like no time at all—in the presence of my guardian angel on the butterfly's wing and an eternity learning lessons from the Creator and the Orb of light deep in the Core.

At some point, I came up to the edge of the Gateway and found that I could not reenter it. The Spinning Melody—up to then my ticket into those higher regions—would no longer take me there. The gates of Heaven were closed.

Once again, describing what this felt like is challenging in the extreme, thanks to the bottleneck of linear language that we have to force everything through here on earth, and the general flattening of experience that happens when we're in the body. Think of every time you've ever experienced disappointment. There is a sense in which all the losses that we undergo here on earth are in truth variations of one absolutely central loss: the loss of Heaven. On the day that the doors of Heaven were closed to me, I felt a sense of sadness unlike any I'd ever known. Emotions are different up there. All the human emotions are present, but they're deeper, more spacious—they're not just inside but outside as well. Imagine that every time your mood changed here on earth, the weather changed instantly along with it. That your tears would bring on a torrential downpour and your joy would make the clouds instantly disappear. That gives a hint of how much more vast and consequential changes of mood feel like up there, how strangely and powerfully what we think of as "inside" and "outside" don't really exist at all.

So it was that I, heartbroken, now sank into a world of ever-increasing sorrow, a gloom that was at the same time an *actual* sinking.

I moved down through great walls of clouds. There was murmuring all around me, but I couldn't understand the words. Then I realized that countless beings were surrounding me, kneeling in arcs that

spread into the distance. Looking back on it now, I realize what these half-seen, half-sensed hierarchies of beings, stretching out into the dark above and below, were doing.

They were praying for me.

Two of the faces I remembered later were those of Michael Sullivan and his wife, Page. I recall seeing them in profile only, but I clearly identified them after my return when language came back. Michael had physically been in the ICU room leading prayers numerous times, but Page was never physically there (although she had said prayers for me too).

These prayers gave me energy. That's probably why, profoundly sad as I was, something in me felt a strange confidence that everything would be all right. These beings knew I was undergoing a transition, and they were singing and praying to help me keep my spirits up. I was headed into the unknown, but by that point I had complete faith and trust that I would be taken care of, as my companion on the butterfly wing and the infinitely loving Deity had promised—that wherever I went, Heaven would come with me. It would come in the form of the Creator, of Om, and it would come in the form of the angel—my angel—the Girl on the Butterfly Wing.

I was on the way back, but I was not alone—and I knew I'd never feel alone again.

20.

Die Afsluiting

Elke keer dat ek weer in die primitiewe Erdwurmperspektief vasgevang was, kon ek die pragtige Spiraalmelodie onthou, wat die hek na die Poort en die Kern oopgemaak het. Ek het lang tye – wat eintlik soos ’n oogwink gevoel het – saam met my engelbewaarder op die vlinder se vlerk deurgebring en was ’n ewigheid lank in die teenwoordigheid van die Skepper en die Ligsfeer diep in die Kern, waar ek verdere lering ontvang het.

Die oomblik het egter aangebreek dat ek by die rand van die Poort gekom het en nie kon binnegaan nie. Die Spiraalmelodie, wat tot in daardie stadium my toegang na die hoër wêrelde verseker het, het my nie meer toegelaat nie. Die poorte van die hemel was gesluit.

Om te beskryf hoe ek gevoel het, is weer eens ’n bykans onmoontlike taak, te wyte aan die drukgang van taal waardeur ons ons gedagtes hier op aarde moet probeer dwing en die vervlakking van ervaring wat intree wanneer ons in die liggaam is. Dink aan elke keer wat jy ooit ’n teleurstelling ervaar het. In ’n sekere sin is al die verliese wat ons hier op aarde ly in wese ’n vorm van een sentrale verlies: die verlies van die hemel. Toe die deure van die hemel vir my toegaan, het ek so weemoedig gevoel soos nog nooit tevore nie. Emosies is anders daar bo. Al die menslike emosies is teenwoordig, maar hulle is dieper, ruimer – nie net aan die binnekant nie, maar buite ook. Stel jou voor dat die weer elke keer saam met jou gemoedstemming sou verander. Dat jou trane ’n swaar reënbui sou loslaat en jou vreugde die wolke sou verdryf. Dit gee ’n vae aanduiding van hoe omvangryk en beduidend gemoedsveranderings daar bo voel, op watter vreemde wyse dit wat ons as “buite” en “binne” beskou, in werklikheid nie bestaan nie.

So het dit gebeur dat ek, in my troostelose toestand, in ’n wêreld van ewigdurende verdriet begin wegsak het, ’n verdriet wat my in werklikheid laat afsak het.

Ek het deur massiewe wolkbanke afbeweeg. Ek het 'n fluistering reg rondom my gehoor, maar ek kon nie die woorde verstaan nie. Toe besef ek dat talle wesens my omring, knielend in sirkels wat oneindig uitkring. Noudat ek daaraan terugdink, besef ek waarmee hierdie skimagtige wesens in die ruimtes bokant en onder my besig was.

Hulle het vir my gebid.

Twee gesigte wat ek later onthou het, was dié van Michael Sullivan en sy vrou, Page. Ek onthou dat ek net die sykant van hulle gesigte gesien het, maar ek het hulle duidelik herken ná my terugkeer, toe taal weer terug was. Michael was verskeie kere in die intesiewesorgsaal waar hy voorgegaan het in gebed, maar Page was nooit self daar nie (hoewel sy ook vir my gebid het).

Hierdie gebede het my krag gegee. Dit is waarskynlik waarom ek 'n vreemde vertroue gevoel het dat alles sal regkom, al het ek so droefgeestig gevoel. Hierdie wesens het geweet dat ek 'n oorgang moet maak, en hulle het gesing en gebid om my te onderskraag. Ek moes die onbekende ingaan, maar nou het ek ten volle vertrou en geglo dat ek behoed en bewaar sou word, soos my metgesel op die vlindervlerk en die oneindig liefdevolle Godheid belowe het – dat waar ek ook al sou gaan, die hemel met my sou wees. Dit sou in die gedaante van die Skepper Om wees, en in die gedaante van die engel – my engel – die Meisie op die Vlindervlerk.

Ek was op pad terug, maar ek was nie alleen nie – en ek het geweet ek sou nooit weer alleen voel nie.

21.

The Rainbow

Thinking about it later, Phyllis said that the one thing she remembered above all else about that week was the rain. A cold, driving rain from low-hanging clouds that never let up and never let the sun peek through. But then, that Sunday morning as she pulled her car into the hospital parking lot, something strange happened. Phyllis had just read a text message from one of the prayer groups in Boston saying, "Expect a miracle." As she pondered just how much of a miracle she should expect, she helped Mom step out of their car, and they both commented that the rain had stopped. To the east, the sun was shooting its rays through a chink in the cloud cover, lighting up the lovely ancient mountains to the west and the layer of cloud above as well, giving the gray clouds a golden tinge.

Then, looking toward the distant peaks, opposite to where the mid-November sun was starting its ascent, there it was.

A perfect rainbow.

Sylvia drove to the hospital with Holley and Bond for a prearranged meeting with my main doctor, Scott Wade. Dr. Wade was also a friend and a neighbor and had been wrestling with the worst decision that doctors dealing with life-threatening illnesses ever face. The longer I stayed in coma, the more likely it became that I would spend the rest of my life in a "persistent vegetative state." Given the high likelihood that I might still succumb to the meningitis if they simply stopped the antibiotics, it might be more sensible to cease using them—rather than to continue treatment in the face of almost certain lifelong coma. Given that my meningitis had not responded at all well to treatment, they were running the risk that they might finally eradicate my meningitis, only to enable me to live for months or years as a once-vital, now-unresponsive body, with zero quality of life.

"Have a seat," Dr. Wade told Sylvia and Holley in a tone that was kind but also unmistakably grim.

"Dr. Brennan and I have each had conference calls with experts at Duke, the University of Virginia, and Bowman Gray medical schools, and I have to tell you that everyone to a person is in agreement that

things do not look good. If Eben doesn't show some real improvement within the next twelve hours, we will probably recommend discussing termination of antibiotics. A week in coma with severe bacterial meningitis is already beyond the limits of any reasonable expectation of recovery. Given those prospects, it might be better to let nature take its course."

"But, I saw his eyelids move yesterday," Holley protested. "Really, they moved. Almost like he was trying to open them. I am sure of what I saw."

"I don't doubt you did," said Dr. Wade. "His white blood cell count has come down as well. That's all good news, and I don't for a minute want to suggest that it isn't. But you need to see the situation in context. We've lightened Eben's sedation considerably, and by this point his neurologic examination should be showing more neurological activity than it is. His lower brain is partially functioning, but it's his higher-level functions that we need, and they're all still completely absent. A certain amount of improvement in apparent alertness occurs in most coma patients over time. Their bodies do things that can make it appear that they're coming back. But they're not. It's simply the brainstem moving into a state called *coma vigile,* a kind of holding pattern that they can stay in for months, or years. That's what the fluttering eyelids are, most likely. And I have to tell you again that seven days is an enormously long time to be in coma with bacterial meningitis."

Dr. Wade was using a lot of words in an attempt to soften the blow of a piece of news that could have been spoken in a single sentence.

It was time to let my body die.

21.

Die Reënboog

Phyllis het later vertel die een indruk van daardie week wat haar bygebly het, was die reën. 'n Koue, deurdringende reën en lae wolke wat nie wou wegtrek en die son deurlaat nie. Maar die Sondagoggend toe sy in die parkeerterrein stilhou, gebeur iets vreemds. Phyllis het pas 'n teksboodskap gekry van een van die gebedsgroepe in Boston wat sê: "Verwag 'n wonderwerk." Dié boodskap is nog in haar gedagtes terwyl sy vir Ma uit die motor help en hulle albei opmerk dat dit ophou reën het. In die ooste loer die son deur die wolke en skyn op die berge in die weste, waar die laag grys wolke deur 'n goue randjie verhelder word.

Toe hulle in die rigting van die bergpieke in die verte kyk, in die teenoorgestelde rigting as die opkomende November-son, sien hulle dit.

'n Perfekte reënboog.

Sylvia was saam met Holley en Bond op pad hospitaal toe vir 'n afspraak met die dokter wat in beheer van my behandeling was, Scott Wade. Dr Wade was ook 'n vriend en buurman en het voor die moeilikste besluit te staan gekom vir 'n dokter wat met lewensbedreigende siekte te doene kry. Hoe langer ek in 'n koma bly, hoe groter was die kans dat ek die res van my lewe in 'n "persisterende vegetatiewe toestand" sou deurbring. Met inagneming van die groot waarskynlikheid dat ek aan die meningitis sou beswyk indien die antibiotika gestaak word, sou dit moontlik die mees verstandige besluit wees – eerder as om met die behandeling voort te gaan en 'n lewenslange koma tegemoet te gaan. My meningitis het glad nie goed gereageer op behandeling nie, en selfs al sou die behandeling suksesvol wees, was daar steeds die risiko dat ek nog maande of jare lank sou voortleef in 'n liggaam wat eens vol lewe was, maar nou onbewus is en slegs in staat tot onwillekeurige handeling, met geen lewensgehalte nie.

“Sit gerus,” nooi dr Wade. Sy stem is vriendelik, maar ernstig.

“Dr Brennan en ek het konferensie-oproepe met deskundiges by die mediese fakulteite van Duke, die Universiteit van Virginië en Bowman Gray gehad, en ek is bevrees hulle stem almal saam dat die vooruitsig nie goed is nie. As Eben nie binne die volgende twaalf uur ’n noemenswaardige verbetering toon nie, sal ons waarskynlik aanbeveel dat die antibiotika gestaak word. ’n Week in ’n koma met ernstige bakteriële meningitis beteken alreeds dat sy kans op herstel uiters skraal is. Met daardie vooruitsig, mag dit dalk beter wees om die natuur sy gang te laat gaan.”

“Maar ek het gister sy ooglede sien beweeg,” maak Holley beswaar.” Hulle het regtig beweeg. Amper asof hy hulle probeer oopmaak. Ek is seker dit is wat ek gesien het.”

“Ek betwyfel dit geensins nie,” sê dr Wade. “Sy witbloedseltelling het ook afgekom. Dit is alles goeie nuus, en ek wil vir geen oomblik sê dit is nie. Maar julle moet al die faktore in ag neem. Ons het reeds Eben se sedasie aansienlik verminder, en sy neurologiese ondersoek behoort in hierdie stadium meer neurologiese aktiwiteit te toon as wat die geval is. Sy lae brein funksioneer gedeeltelik, maar dit is die hoëvlakfunksies wat ons graag wil sien, en hulle is heeltemal afwesig. Die meeste komapasiënte toon mettertyd ’n effense verbetering. Hulle liggame reageer op maniere wat die verwagting skep dat hulle bewussyn terugkeer, maar dit is nie so nie. Dit is eenvoudig die breinstam wat na ’n toestand van *coma vigil* oorgaan, ’n soort skynkoma wat maande of jare lank kan voortduur. Ek moet benadruk dat sewe dae in ’n koma ’n baie lang tyd is vir iemand met bakteriële meningitis.”

Dr Wade het met ’n omweg probeer om die boodskap oor te dra wat hy in een sin kon gesê het.

Dit is tyd om my liggaam toe te laat om te sterf.

22.

Six Faces

As I descended, more faces bubbled out of the muck, just as they always did when I was moving down into the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View. But there was something different about the faces this time. They were human now, not animal.

And they were very clearly saying things.

Not that I could make out what they were saying. It was a bit like the old Charlie Brown cartoons, when the adults speak and all you hear are indecipherable sounds. Later, upon looking back on it, I realized I could actually identify six of the faces that I saw. There was Sylvia, there was Holley, and her sister Peggy. There was Scott Wade, and there was Susan Reintjes. Of these, the only one who was not actually physically present at my bedside in those final hours was Susan. But in her way, she had, of course, been by my bedside, too, because that night, as the night before, she had sat down in her home in Chapel Hill and willed herself into my presence.

Later, learning about this, I was puzzled that my mother Betty and my sisters, who had been there all week, holding my hand lovingly for endless hours, were absent from this array of faces I'd seen. Mom had been suffering from a stress fracture in her foot, using a walker to ambulate, but she had faithfully taken her turn in the vigil. Phyllis, Betsy, and Jean had all been there. Then I learned that they had not been present that final night. The faces I remembered were those who were physically there the seventh morning of my coma, or the evening before.

Again, though, at the time, as I made the descent, I had no names or identities to attach to any of these faces. I only knew, or sensed, that they were important to me in some way.

One more in particular drew me toward it with special power. It began to tug at me. With a jolt that seemed to echo up and down the whole vast well of clouds and praying angelic beings through which I was descending, I suddenly realized that the beings of the Gateway and the Core—beings I had known and loved, seemingly, forever—were not the only beings I knew. I knew, and loved, beings down below me, too—down in the realm I was fast approaching. Beings I

had, until now, completely forgotten.

This knowledge focused on all six faces, but in particular on the sixth one. It was so familiar. I realized with a feeling of shock bordering on absolute fear that whoever it was, it was the face of someone who needed me. Someone who would never recover if I left. If I abandoned it, the loss would be unbearable—like the feeling I'd gotten when the gates to Heaven had closed. It would be a betrayal I simply couldn't commit.

Up to that point, I had been free. I had journeyed through worlds in the way that adventurers most effectively can: without any real concern about their fate. The outcome didn't ultimately matter, because even when I was in the Core, there was never any worry or guilt about letting anyone down. That had, of course, been one of the first things that I'd learned when I was with the Girl on the Butterfly Wing and she'd told me: "There is nothing you can do that is wrong."

But now it was different. So different that, for the first time in my entire voyage, I felt remarkable terror. It was a terror not for myself, but for these faces—in particular for that sixth face. A face that I still couldn't identify, but that I knew was crucially important to me.

This face took on ever greater detail, until at last I saw that it—that *he*—was actually pleading for me to return: to risk the terrible descent into the world below to be with him again. I still could not understand his words, but somehow they conveyed that I had a stake in this world below—that I had, as they say, "skin in the game."

It mattered that I returned. I had ties here—ties that I had to honor. The clearer the face became, the more I realized this. And the closer I came to recognizing the face.

The face of a young boy.

22.

Ses Gesigte

Terwyl ek afdaal, verskyn nog gesigte uit die duister, soos altyd gebeur wanneer ek in die Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief inbeweeg. Maar die gesigte lyk nou anders. Dit is nou mense se gesigte, nie dié van diere nie.

En hulle praat.

Nie dat ek dit kan uitmaak nie. Dit is soos die ou Charlie Brown-strokiesfilms, waar mens net onduidelike klanke hoor wanneer die volwassenes praat. Toe ek later terugdink, het ek besef dat ek ses van die gesigte kon uitmaak. Sylvia was daar, Holley was daar, en haar suster Peggy. Scott Wade was daar, en Susan Reintjes. Die enigste van hulle wat nie fisiek daar langs my teenwoordig was gedurende daardie laaste paar uur nie, was Susan. Maar op haar manier was sy ook teenwoordig, want daardie aand, soos die vorige een, het sy by haar huis in Chapel Hill gesit en haar in my teenwoordigheid ingedink.

Toe ek almal later hieroor uitvra, kon ek nie verstaan waarom my ma Betty en my susters, wat die hele week by my gewaak en my hand ure lank vasgehou het, nie ook tussen die herkenbare gesigte was nie. Ma het 'n voetbesering gehad en met 'n loopraam beweeg, maar sy het getrou haar beurt geneem. Phyllis, Betsy en Jean het almal by my gewaak. Maar toe het ek verneem dat hulle nie die laaste aand daar was nie. Die gesigte wat ek onthou het, was dié van mense wat die sewende oggend van my koma of die vorige aand daar was.

Terwyl ek afdaal, dink ek egter nie aan 'n naam of identiteit om aan enige van hierdie gesigte te koppel nie. Ek weet net, of voel aan, dat hulle op die een of ander manier vir my belangrik is.

Een van die gesigte trek my op 'n besondere manier aan. Ek voel hoe dit my al hoe sterker aantrek. Met 'n geweldige skok, wat vir my voel asof dit weergalm in die reuse-wolkeslag vol biddende engelwesens waarin ek afsak, besef ek meteens dat die wesens van die Poort en die Kern – wat ek al 'n ewigheid lank ken en liefhet, so voel dit vir

my – nie die enigste wesens is wat ek ken nie. Ek het wesens in die wêreld onder my ook geken en liefgehad – die wêreld waarheen ek nou op pad is. Wesens waarvan ek tot nou toe heeltemal vergeet het.

Met hierdie kennis het ek op al ses gesigte gefokus, maar veral op die sesde een. Dis was so bekend. Met ’n gevoel van skok wat grens aan vrees het ek besef dat wie dit ook al is, dit die gesig is van iemand wat my nodig het. Iemand wat nooit daaroor sou kom as ek sou weggaan nie. As ek die persoon sou verlaat, sou dit ondraaglik wees – soos die gevoel wat ek gehad het toe die hekke na die Poort gesluit was. Ek kon eenvoudig nie daardie persoon in die steek laat nie.

Tot daardie oomblik was ek vry. Ek het in wêrelde gereis soos avonturiers dit die beste kan doen: sonder enige bekommernis oor hulle lot. Die uitkoms het nie saak gemaak nie, want, selfs toe ek in die Kern was, het ek nooit nodig gehad om my oor iemand anders te bekommer nie. Dit was, natuurlik, een van die eerste dinge wat ek by die meisie op die vlindervlerk geleer het. Sy het my verseker, “Daar is niks wat jy verkeerd kan doen nie.”

Maar nou was dit anders. So anders dat ek vir die eerste keer tydens my merkwaardige reis intense vrees gevoel het. Dit was nie vrees vir my onthalwe nie, maar vir hierdie ses gesigte – veral die sesde gesig. ’n Gesig wat ek nie kon identifiseer nie, maar wat ek geweet het vir my van die uiterste belang is.

Hierdie gesig het al hoe meer besonderhede bygekry, tot ek gesien het dit is *hy* wat my soebat om terug te kom: om die vreeslike terugkeer na die wêreld te onderneem om weer by hom te wees. Ek kon nog steeds nie sy woorde verstaan nie, maar op een of ander manier het ek die boodskap ontvang dat ek ’n aandeel in hierdie wêreld het.

Dit was belangrik dat ek moes terugkom. Ek het verbintenisse hier, verpligtinge wat ek moet nakom. Hoe duideliker die gesig geraak het, hoe meer het ek dit besef. En hoe nader het ek daaraan gekom om die gesig te herken.

Die gesig van ’n jong seun.

23.

Final Night, First Morning

Before sitting down with Dr. Wade, Holley told Bond to wait outside the door because she hadn't wanted him to hear what she feared was very bad news. But sensing this, Bond had lingered outside the door and caught some of Dr. Wade's words. Enough of them to understand the real situation. To understand that his father was not, in fact, coming back. Ever.

Bond ran into the room and up to my bed. Sobbing, he kissed my forehead and rubbed my shoulders. Then he pulled up my eyelids and said, directly into my empty, unfocused eyes, "You're going to be okay, Daddy. You're going to be okay." He kept on repeating it, again and again, believing, in his child's way, that if he said it enough times, surely he would make it true.

Meanwhile, in a room down the hall, Holley stared into space, absorbing Dr. Wade's words as best she could.

Finally, she said, "I guess that means I should call Eben at college and have him come back."

Dr. Wade didn't deliberate on the question.

"Yes, I think that would be the right thing to do."

Holley walked over to the conference room's large picture window, which looked out on the storm-soaked but brightening Virginia mountains, took out her cell phone, and dialed Eben's number.

As she did so, Sylvia stood up from her chair.

"Holley, wait a minute," she said. "Let me just go in there one more time."

Sylvia went into the ICU room and stood by the bed next to Bond, as he sat silently rubbing my hand. Sylvia put her hand on my arm and stroked it gently. As it had been all week, my head was turned slightly to one side. For a week, everyone had been looking *at* my face, rather than into it. The only time my eyes opened was when the doctors checked for pupil dilation in reaction to light (one of the simplest but most effective ways to check for brainstem function), or when Holley or Bond, against the doctors' repeated instructions, had insisted on doing so and encountered two eyes staring dead and unmoored, askew like those of a broken doll.

But now, as Sylvia and Bond stared into my slack face, resolutely refusing to accept what they had just heard from the doctor, something happened.

My eyes opened.

Sylvia shrieked. She would later tell me that the next biggest shock, almost as shocking as my eyes opening, was the way they immediately began to look around. Up, down, here, there . . . They reminded her not of an adult emerging from a seven-day coma, but of an infant—someone newly born to the world, looking around at it, taking it in for the first time.

In a way, she was right.

Sylvia recovered from her initial flat-out shock and realized that I was agitated by something. She ran out of the room to where Holley was still standing at the big picture window, talking to Eben IV.

"Holley . . . Holley!" Sylvia shouted. "He's awake. Awake! Tell Eben his dad is coming back."

Holley stared at Sylvia. "Eben," she said into the phone, "I have to call you back. He's . . . your father is coming back . . . to life."

Holley walked, then ran into the ICU, with Dr. Wade right behind her. Sure enough, I was thrashing around on the bed. Not mechanically, but because I was conscious, and something was clearly bothering me. Dr. Wade immediately understood what it was: the breathing tube that was still in my throat. The tube I no longer needed, because my brain, along with the rest of my body, had just kicked back to life. He reached over, cut the securing tape, and carefully extracted it.

I choked a little, gasped down my first fully unaided lungful of air in seven days, and spoke the first words I'd spoken in a week as well:

"Thank you."

Phyllis was still thinking about the rainbow she'd just seen when she exited the elevator. She was pushing Mom in a wheelchair. They walked into the room, and Phyllis almost fell over backward in disbelief. I was sitting up in my bed, meeting their gaze with my own. Betsy was jumping up and down. She hugged Phyllis. They were both in tears. Phyllis came closer and looked deep into my eyes.

I looked back at her, then around at everyone else.

As my loving family and caregivers gathered around my bed, still dumbstruck by the inexplicable transition, I had a peaceful, joyous smile.

"All is well," I said, radiating that blissful message as much as

speaking the words. I looked at each of them, deeply, acknowledging the divine miracle of our very existence.

"Don't worry . . . all is well," I repeated, to assuage any doubt. Phyllis told me later that it was as if I were imparting a crucial message from the beyond, that the world is as it should be, that we have nothing to fear. She said she often recalls that moment when she is vexed by some earthly concern—to find comfort in knowing that we are never alone.

As I took stock of the entourage, I seemed to be returning to my earthly existence.

"What," I asked those who were assembled, "are you doing here?"

To which Phyllis replied, "What are *you* doing here?"

23.

Die Laaste Nag, die Eerste Oggend

Voor haar gesprek met dr Wade het Holley vir Bond gevra om buite die deur te wag, omdat sy nie wou hê dat hy moet hoor wat sy gevrees het baie slegte nuus sou wees nie. Bond het dit egter vermoed en by die deur gestaan en af en toe iets gehoor wat dr Wade sê. Genoeg om te besef wat die realiteit van die situasie is. Genoeg om te besef dat sy pa nie weer sou terugkom nie. Nooit nie.

Bond hardloop huilend by my kamer in. Hy soen my voorkop en vryf my skouers. Hy trek my ooglede oop en kyk in my leë, nikssiende oë. "Pappa gaan oukei wees, hoor? Jy gaan oukei wees!" Hy hou aan om dit te herhaal, en glo op sy kinderlike manier dat as hy dit genoeg kere sê, dan sal dit waar word.

Intussen, in die konferensiekamer in die gang af, sit Holley in die niet en staar en probeer dr Wade se woorde verwerk.

Uiteindelik sê sy: "Dan moet ons seker vir Eben by die universiteit bel en sê hy moet terugkom."

Dr Wade dink nie lank hieroor na nie.

"Ja, ek dink dit is die regte ding om te doen."

Holley stap na die konferensiekamer se groot venster wat uitkyk op die helder blou berge van Virginië, haal haar selfoon uit en bel Eben se nommer.

Op daardie oomblik staan Sylvia op uit haar stoel.

"Wag, Holley," sê sy. "Laat ek nog net een keer na hom toe gaan."

Sylvia gaan na die intensiewesorgseenheid en staan langs die bed by Bond, wat nog my hand sit en vryf. Sylvia plaas haar hand op my arm en streel dit saggies. My kop is effens weggedraai, soos dit hele week al was. Die hele week kyk almal nog *na* die kant van my gesig en nie van voor af *in* my gesig nie. Die enigste keer wat my oë oop was, was toe die dokters my ondersoek het en die dilatasie van die pupille in reaksie op lig nagegaan het (een van die eenvoudigste maar mees effektiewe maniere om breinstamfunksie te kontroleer), of toe Holley

of Bond, teen die dokters se instruksies, my ooglede oopgedruk en net twee starende oë gesien het.

Maar terwyl Sylvia en Bond na my uitdrukkinglose gesig staar, onwillig om te aanvaar wat die dokter pas gesê het, gebeur iets.

My oë gaan oop.

Sylvia gil hardop. Sy sou my later vertel die grootste skok, behalwe dat my oë oopgegaan het, was die manier waarop ek onmiddellik begin rondkyk het. Op, af, hier, daar … Dit het haar laat dink, nie aan ’n volwassene wat pas uit ’n koma ontwaak het nie, maar aan ’n baba – ’n pasgeborene wat alles vir die eerste keer sien.

Op ’n manier was sy reg.

Sylvia herstel van haar aanvanklike skok en besef daar is iets wat my pla. Sy hardloop uit die vertrek na waar Holley by die venster met Eben IV staan en praat.

“Holley … Holley!” roep Sylvia. “Hy’s wakker. Wakker! Sê vir Eben sy pa het bygekom.”

Holley staar Sylvia aan. “Eben, ek bel jou netnou terug. Hy … jou pa … het sy bewussyn herwin …”

Holley begin loop en dan hardloop na my saal, met dr Wade kort op haar hakke. Ek lê en rondrol op die bed, nie onwillekeurig nie, maar omdat ek by my bewussyn is en iets my pla. Dr Wade verstaan onmiddellik wat die probleem is: Die asemhalingsbuis is nog in my keel. Die buis wat ek nie meer nodig het nie, omdat my brein, en die res van my liggaam, weer aan die gang is. Hy knip die kleefband wat die buis vashou los, en trek die buis versigtig uit.

Ek stik effens, asem die eerste selfstandige long vol lug binne sewe dae in en praat ook vir die eerste keer in sewe dae:

“Dankie.”

Phyllis dink nog aan die reënboog wat sy buite gesien het toe hulle uit die hysbak kom. Sy stoot Ma in ’n rolstoel. Hulle kom die kamer binne en Phyllis val byna agteroor in ongeloof. Ek sit regop in my bed en kyk haar aan. Betsy spring op en af. Sy omhels Phyllis. Hulle is albei in trane. Phyllis kom nader en kyk diep in my oë.

Ek kyk na haar en dan na die ander. Al my liefdevolle familielede en versorgers is nog stom van verbasing oor die onverklaarbare ommekeer, maar ek het ’n vredige en vreugdevolle uitdrukking.

“Alles is reg,” sê ek, en straal die salige boodskap uit terwyl ek die

woorde uitspreek. Ek kyk elkeen diep in die oë, ter erkenning van die wonderlike werklikheid van ons bestaan.

"Toe maar … alles is reg," herhaal ek, om enige twyfel uit die weg te ruim. Phyllis het later vertel dit was asof ek 'n belangrike boodskap van die oorkant af oordra, dat alles reg is in die wêreld, dat ons niks hoef te vrees nie. Sy het gesê sy dink dikwels aan daardie oomblik as daar iets nietigs is wat haar pla – en kry troos uit die gedagte dat ons nooit alleen is nie.

Terwyl ek almal aankyk wat daar om my bed staan, is dit asof ek begin terugkeer na my aardse bestaan.

Ek vra die groepie wat daar bymekaar is: "Wat maak julle almal hier?"

En Phyllis se antwoord is: "Wat maak *jy* hier?"

24.

The Return

Bond had envisioned his same old dad would wake up, take a look around, and just need a little catching up on what had happened before resuming my role as the father he'd always known.

He soon discovered, however, that it wasn't going to be quite that easy. Dr. Wade cautioned Bond about two things: First, he shouldn't count on my remembering anything I was saying as I emerged from the coma. He explained that the process of memory takes enormous brain power, and that my brain wasn't sufficiently recovered to be performing at that sophisticated level. Second, he shouldn't worry much about what I said during these early days, because a lot of it was going to sound pretty crazy.

He proved right on both counts.

That first morning back, Bond proudly showed me the drawing he and Eben IV had made of my white blood cells attacking the *E. coli* bacteria.

"Wow, wonderful," I said.

Bond glowed with pride and excitement.

Then I continued: "What are the conditions like outside? What does the computer readout say? You need to move, I'm getting ready to jump!"

Bond's face fell. Needless to say, this was not the full return he had been hoping for.

I was having wild delusions, reliving some of the most exciting times of my life, in the most vivid fashion.

In my mind, I was on jump run, ready to skydive out of a DC3 three miles above the earth . . . going to be the last man out, my favorite position. It was the maximal flying of my body.

Bursting into brilliant sunshine outside the airplane door, I immediately assumed a head dive with my arms tucked behind me (in my mind), feeling the familiar buffeting as I fell beneath the prop blast, watching from upside down as the belly of the enormous silvery plane started to shoot skyward, its huge propellers whirling in slow motion, earth and clouds below mirrored on its underbelly. I was musing over the odd sight of flaps and wheels down (as if landing)

while still miles above the ground (all to slow down and minimize wind shock to the exiting jumpers).

I tucked my arms in extra tight in a head-down dive to accelerate briskly to over 220 miles per hour, nothing more than my speckled blue helmet and shoulders against thin upper air to resist the tug of the huge planet below, moving more than the length of a football field every second, the wind roaring by furiously at thrice hurricane speed, louder than anything—ever.

Passing between the tops of two enormous puffy white clouds, I rocketed into the clear chasm between them, green earth and sparkling deep blue sea far below, in my wild, thrilling rush down to join my friends, just barely visible, in the colorful snowflake formation, growing larger every second as other jumpers joined in, far, far below . . .

I was flipping back and forth between being present there in the ICU and being out of my mind in the adrenaline-soaked delusions of a gorgeous skydive.

I was between nutty—and getting it.

For two days I blabbered about skydiving, airplanes, and the Internet to all who would listen. As my physical brain gradually recovered its bearings, I entered a strange and exhausting paranoid universe. I became obsessed with an ugly background of "Internet messages" that would show up whenever I closed my eyes, and that sometimes appeared on the ceiling when they were open. When I shut my eyes I heard grinding, monotonous, anti-melodious chanting sounds that usually went away when I opened them again. I kept putting my finger in the air, pointing just like ET, trying to guide the Internet ticker flowing past me, in Russian, Chinese.

In short, I was a little crazy.

It was all a little like the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View, only more nightmarish, because what I heard and saw was laced with the trappings of my human past (I recognized my family members, even when, as in Holley's case, I didn't remember their names).

But at the same time it completely lacked the astonishing clarity and vibrant richness—the ultra-reality—of the Gateway and the Core. I was most definitely back in my brain.

Despite that initial moment of seemingly full lucidity when my eyes first opened, I soon once again had no memory of my human life before coma. My only memory was of where I had just been: the rough, ugly Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View, the idyllic Gateway,

and the awesome heavenly Core. My mind—my real self—was squeezing its way back into the all too tight and limiting suit of physical existence, with its spatiotemporal bounds, its linear thought, and its limitation to verbal communication. Things that up until a week ago I'd thought were the only mode of existence around, but which now showed themselves as extraordinarily cumbersome limitations.

Physical life is characterized by defensiveness, whereas spiritual life is just the opposite. This is the only explanation I could come up with to explain why my reentry had such a strong paranoid aspect to it. For a stretch of time I became convinced that Holley (whose name I still didn't know but whom I somehow recognized as my wife) and my physicians were trying to kill me. I had further dreams and fantasies about flight and skydiving—some of them extremely long and involved. In the longest, most intense, and almost ridiculously detailed of these, I found myself in a South Florida cancer clinic featuring outdoor escalators where I was pursued by Holley, two South Florida police officers, and a pair of Asian ninja photographers on cable pulleys.

I was in fact going through something called "ICU psychosis." It's normal, even expected, for patients whose brains are coming back online after being inactive for a long period. I'd seen it many a time, but never from the inside. And from the inside it was very, very different indeed.

The most interesting thing about this session of nightmares and paranoid fantasies, in retrospect, is that all of it was indeed that: a fantasy. Portions of it—in particular the extended South Florida ninja nightmare—were extremely intense, and even outright terrifying while happening. But in retrospect—indeed, almost immediately after this period ended—it all became clearly recognizable as what it was: something cooked up by my very beleaguered brain as it was trying to recover its bearings. Some of the dreams I had during this period were stunningly and frighteningly vivid. But in the end they served only to underline how very, very dissimilar my dream state had been compared with the ultra-reality deep in coma.

As for the rockets, airplanes, and skydiving themes that I imagined so consistently, they were, I later realized, quite accurate from a symbolic point of view. Because the fact was that I *was* making a dangerous reentry from a place far away, to the abandoned but now once again functional space station of my brain. One could hardly ask

for a better earthly analogy for what happened to me during my week out of body than a rocket launch.

24.

Terugkeer

Bond het gedink dat die pa wat hy geken het sou wakker word, bietjie rondkyk, net ’n bietjie sou moes inhaal by al die gebeure van die voorafgaande week en dan weer die rol van sy pa sou hervat.

Hy kom egter gou agter dat dit nie so maklik sal gaan nie. Dr Wade waarsku Bond oor twee dinge: Hy moet nie daarop reken dat ek enigiets sal onthou wat ek gesê het toe ek uit die koma ontwaak het nie. Hy verduidelik dat die geheueproses geweldig baie breinkrag verg en dat my brein nog nie voldoende herstel het om op so ’n gevorderde vlak te funksioneer nie. Hy moet hom ook nie veel steur aan wat ek in daardie eerste dae kwytraak nie, want baie daarvan sou taamlik vreemd klink. Hy was reg.

Die eerste oggend ná my terugkeer wys Bond ewe trots vir my sy en Eben IV se tekening van my witbloedselle wat die *E. coli*-bakterieë aanval.

“Sjoe, dis wonderlik,” is my kommentaar.

Bond straal trots en ingenome.

Toe gaan ek voort: “Wat is die toestande buite? Wat sê die rekenaarverslag? Jy moet gou maak, ek is reg om te spring!”

Bond kyk my vol verbasing en teleurstelling aan. Dit is nie die volle herstel wat hy verwag het nie.

Ek was besig om wilde gedagtevlugte te kry en intens opwindende ervarings uit my verlede te herleef. In my gedagtes staan ek gereed om drie myl bokant die aarde uit ’n DC3 te spring …. Ek is die laaste ou uit, my gunsteling-posisie. Dit is die naaste wat my liggaam aan vlieg kan kom.

Ek spring uit, in die helder sonskyn, en gaan onmiddellik oor tot ’n kopduik, my arms agter my rug (in my gedagtes), en voel die bekende geskud terwyl ek onder die skroef se lugslag deurval, en onderstebo kyk hoe die silwer vliegtuig in die lug opskiet terwyl die reuseskroewe stadig draai, met die aarde en wolke wat aan sy onderkant weerspieël

word. Ek verwonder my aan die vreemde gesig van oop klappe en wiele (asof gereed vir landing) myle bokant die grond (om die windskok vir die valskermspringers te verminder).

Ek druk my arms styf teen my lyf en duik kop eerste, terwyl ek teen 220 myl per uur versnel, met net my gespikkelde blou valhelm en my skouers wat teen die dun lug en die aantrekkingskrag van die reuseplaneet daar onder weerstand bied, en elke sekonde die volle afstand van ’n voetbalveld aflê. Die wind dreun teen drie maal die spoed van ’n orkaan, harder as enigiets – ooit.

In my wilde, verruklike vaart skiet ek tussen die toppe van twee reuse-kumuluswolke deur, die groen aarde en skitterende diep blou see daar ver onder, om aan te sluit by my vriende in die kleurvolle sneuvlokkie-formasie wat elke sekonde aangroei met springers wat bykom.

So glip ek heen en weer tussen die hede in die intensiewesorgeenheid en my gedagtevlug oor die verruklike adrenalien-aangevuurde sensasie van ’n valskermsprong.

Ek is die een oomblik buite my verstand en die volgende weer terug.

Twee dae lank babbel ek oor valskermspronge, vliegtuie en die Internet, en vertel vir almal wat wil luister. Terwyl my brein geleidelik weer tot verhaal kom, betree ek ’n vreemde en ontstellende paranoïese wêreld. Ek raak behep met ’n aaklige agtergrond van “Internet”-boodskappe wat verskyn wanneer ek my oë sluit, en soms op die plafon verskyn as ek my oë oopmaak. As ek my oë toemaak, hoor ek eentonige, onmelodieuse dreunklanke wat gewoonlik weer weggaan sodra ek my oë oopmaak. Ek hou my vinger in die lug, soos ET, en reguleer die Internet-invoer wat voor my oë verbyrol – in Russies en Chinees.

Ek is gewoon nie by my volle verstand nie.

Dit is alles ’n bietjie soos die Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief, maar meer soos ’n nagmerrie, omdat daar elemente uit my aardse geheue is. Ek herken my familielede, selfs al kon ek nie hulle name onthou nie – nie eens Holley s’n nie. Terselfdertyd het die gedagtevlugte nie die verbysterende helderheid en superrealiteit van die Poort en Kern nie. Ek is sonder twyfel weer terug in my brein.

Ondanks daardie eerste helder oomblik nadat ek my oë oopgemaak

het en oënskynlik heeltemal by my positiewe was, het ek gou geen herinnering van my lewe voor die koma nie. My enigste herinnering is van waar ek pas vandaan gekom het: die weersinwekkende Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief, die idilliese Poort en die ontsagwekkende hemelse Kern. My gees – my ware self – probeer nou weer inpas in die dwangbuis van my liggaamlike bestaan, met sy tydruimtelike grense, lineêre denkwyse en ingeperktheid van verbale kommunikasie. Dinge wat ek tot 'n week gelede as die enigste bestaansvorm beskou het, maar wat nou uiters lastige beperkings is.

Liggaamlike bestaan word deur geslotenheid gekenmerk, terwyl geestelike bestaan net die teenoorgestelde is. Dit is die enigste manier wat ek kan verklaar waarom my terugkeer so 'n paranoïese element gehad het. 'n Tyd lank was ek oortuig dat my dokters en Holley (wie se naam ek steeds nie kon onthou nie, hoewel ek haar soms as my vrou herken het) my probeer doodmaak. Ek het nog baie drome en gedagtevlugte oor vlieg en valskermspring gehad, waarvan sommige uiters ingewikkeld en uitgerek was. In die langste en mees intense een, wat ek in die fynste en in taamlik belaglike besonderhede ervaar het, was ek in 'n kankerkliniek in Suid-Florida met buitenshuise roltrappe waar Holley, twee polisieoffisiere en twee ninja-fotograwe op wiele my agtervolg.

Wat ek besig was om deur te maak, staan bekend as "intensiewesorgpsigose". Dit is normaal en kom dikwels voor by pasiënte wie se breinfunksie lank onaktief was. As dokter het ek dit self dikwels gesien, maar nog nooit van binne ervaar nie. En van binne was dit iets heel anders.

Die interessantste aspek van hierdie nagmerrie-fase was juis dat dit net verbeeldingsvlugte was. Dele daarvan was baie intens en selfs vreesaanjaend – soos die uitgebreide ninja-nagmerrie. Maar terugskouend – onmiddellik ná afloop van hierdie fase – het ek dit herken as iets wat tydens die herstelperiode deur my brein voortgebring is. Sommige van die drome wat ek in hierdie tyd gehad het, was uiters helder. Maar op die ou einde het dit maar net die verskil tussen die droomfase en die intense werklikheid van die diep koma beklemtoon.

Later het ek besef dat die vuurpyle, vliegtuie en valskermspronge wat so dikwels in hierdie verbeeldingsvlugte voorgekom het, uit 'n

simboliese oogpunt eintlik heel akkurate temas was. Ek het inderwaarheid ’n gevaarlike terugreis van ’n afgeleë plek onderneem, terug na die verlate maar nou weer funksionele ruimtestasie van my brein. Mens kan skaars ’n beter analogie bedink vir wat met my gebeur het tydens my week buite my liggaam as die lansering van ’n vuurpyl.

25.

Not There Yet

Bond wasn't the only one having difficulty accepting the decidedly kooky person I was during those first days back. The day after I recovered consciousness—Monday—Phyllis called Eben IV on his computer using Skype.

"Eben, here's your dad," she said, turning the video camera toward me.

"Hi, Dad! How's it going?" he said cheerfully.

For a minute I just grinned and stared at the computer screen. When I finally spoke, Eben was crushed. I was painfully slow in my speech, and the words themselves made little sense. Eben later told me, "You sounded like a zombie—like someone on a bad acid trip." Unfortunately, he had not been forewarned about the possibility of an ICU psychosis.

Gradually my paranoia abated, and my thinking and conversation became more lucid. Two days after my awakening, I was transferred to the Neuroscience Step-down Unit. The nurses there gave Phyllis and Betsy cots so that they could sleep next to me. I trusted no one but the two of them—they made me feel safe, tethered to my new reality.

The only problem was that I didn't sleep. I kept them up all night, going on about the Internet, space stations, Russian double agents, and all manner of related nonsense. Phyllis tried to convince the nurses that I had a cough, hoping a little cough syrup would bring on an hour or so of uninterrupted sleep. I was like a newborn who did not adhere to a sleep schedule.

In my quieter moments, Phyllis and Betsy helped pull me slowly back to earth. They recalled all kinds of stories from our childhood, and though by and large I listened as if I were hearing them for the first time, I was fascinated all the same. The more they talked, the more something important began to glimmer inside me—the realization that I had, in fact, been there for these events myself.

Very quickly, both sisters told me later, the brother they had known became visible again, through the thick fog of paranoid chatter.

"It was amazing," Betsy later told me. "You were just coming out of

coma, you weren't at all fully aware of where you were or what was going on, you talked about all kinds of crazy stuff half the time, and yet your sense of humor was just fine. It was obviously *you*. You were back!"

"One of the first things you did was crack a joke about feeding yourself," Phyllis later confided. "We were prepared to have fed you spoonful by spoonful for as long as it took. But you'd have none of it. You were determined to get that orange Jell-O into your mouth on your own."

As the temporarily stunned engines of my brain kicked back in ever further, I would watch myself say or do things and marvel: where did *that* come from? Early on, a Lynchburg friend named Jackie came by to visit. Holley and I had known Jackie and her husband, Ron, well, having bought our house from them. Without my willing them to do so, my deeply ingrained southern social graces kicked in. Seeing Jackie, I immediately asked, "How's Ron?"

After a few more days, I started having occasional genuinely lucid conversations with my visitors, and again it was fascinating to see how much of these connections were automatic and did not require much effort on my part. Like a jet on autopilot, my brain somehow negotiated these increasingly familiar landscapes of human experience. I was getting a firsthand demonstration of a truth that I'd known very well as a neurosurgeon: the brain is a truly marvelous mechanism.

Of course, the unspoken question on everybody's mind (including mine in my more lucid moments) was: How well would I get? Was I really returning in full, or had the *E. coli* done at least some of the damage all the doctors had been sure it would do? This daily waiting tore at everyone, especially Holley, who feared that all of a sudden the miraculous progress would stop, and she would be left with only a portion of the "me" she had known.

Yet day by day, ever more of that "me" returned. Language. Memories. Recognition. A certain mischievous streak I've always been known for returned as well. And while they were pleased to see my sense of humor back, my two sisters weren't always thrilled with how I chose to use it. Monday afternoon, Phyllis touched my forehead and I recoiled.

"Ouch," I screamed. "That hurts!"

Then, after enjoying everybody's horrified expressions, I said, "Just kidding."

Everyone was surprised by the speed of my recovery—except for me. I—as of yet—had no real clue how close to death I had actually been. As, one by one, friends and family headed back to their lives, I wished them well and remained blissfully ignorant of the tragedy that had been so narrowly averted. I was so ebullient that one of the neurologists who evaluated me for rehab placement insisted that I was "too euphoric," and that I was probably suffering from brain damage. This doctor, like me, was a regular bow-tie wearer, and I returned the favor of his diagnosis by telling my sisters, after he had left, that he was "strangely flat of affect for a bow-tie aficionado."

Even then, I knew something that more and more of the people around me would come to accept as well. Doctors' views or no doctors' views, I wasn't sick, or brain-damaged. I was completely well.

In fact—though at this point only I knew this—I was completely and truly "well" for the first time in my entire life.

25.

Waarlik Gesond

Dit was nie net vir Bond moeilik om gewoond te raak aan my eienaardige gedrag gedurende die eerste paar dae ná my terugkeer nie. Maandag, die dag nadat ek my bewussyn herwin het, bel Phyllis vir Eben IV per Skype op sy rekenaar.

“Eben, hier is jou pa,” sê sy en draai die videokamera na my toe.

“Hallo, Pa, hoe gaan dit?” vra hy opgewek.

’n Rukkie lank sit ek net en glimlag en staar na die rekenaarskerm. Toe ek eindelik praat, is Eben verpletter. Ek praat pynlik stadig en die woorde maak skaars sin. Eben het my later vertel: “Jy het soos ’n zombie geklink – soos iemand vol dwelms.” Ongelukkig het niemand hom gewaarsku oor die moontlikheid van intensiewesorg-psigose nie.

Geleidelik neem my paranoia af, en my gedagtegang en gesprekke raak meer sinvol. Twee dae nadat ek bygekom het, word ek na die neurowetenskaphersteleenheid oorgeplaas. Die personeel gee vir Phyllis en Betsy opslaanbedjies sodat hulle langs my kan slaap. Ek vertrou niemand behalwe hulle nie – hulle laat my veilig voel, gee my vastigheid in die nuwe werklikheid.

Die enigste probleem is dat ek nie wil slaap nie. Ek hou hulle heelnag wakker met praatjies oor die Internet, ruimtestasies, Russiese spioene en allerhande onsin. Phyllis probeer naderhand om hoesstroop by die personeel te kry, in die hoop dat ’n bietjie hoesstroop my ’n uur of wat sou laat slaap. Ek is soos ’n pasgebore baba wat nie in ’n slaaproetine kan kom nie.

In my rustiger oomblikke kry Phyllis en Betsy dit reg om my geleidelik weer aan die aarde te anker. Hulle vertel staaltjies uit ons jeug, en hoewel ek luister asof ek dit die eerste keer hoor, prikkel dit tog my geheue. Hoe meer hulle vertel, hoe meer begin ’n belangrike besef by my posvat – dat ek self deel was van hierdie gebeure. My susters kom agter dat die broer wat hulle geken het stadig maar seker deur die waansinnige gebabbel begin deurskemer.

"Dit was so merkwaardig," het Betsy my later vertel. "Jy was besig om uit die koma te ontwaak, jy was nie heeltemal bewus van waar jy is of wat aan die gang is nie, jy het die meeste van die tyd deurmekaar gepraat, maar tog was jou sin vir humor daar. Dit was onmiskenbaar *jy*. Jy was terug!"

"Een van jou eerste grappies was oor die voerdery," het Phyllis dit beaam. "Ons was bereid om jou so lank as wat dit nodig was lepel vir lepel te voer. Maar jy wou niks weet nie. Jy was vasberade om self daardie lepel vol jellie by jou mond te kry."

Terwyl my breinfunksies stadigaan weer in rat kom, is ek dikwels self verbaas oor dinge wat ek sê of doen. Jackie, 'n vriendin uit Lynchburg, kom my besoek. Ek en Holley het haar en haar man Ron leer ken toe ons ons huis by hulle gekoop het. Sonder dat ek doelbewus daaraan dink, gaan my gekondisioneerde goeie maniere tot aksie oor. Toe ek Jackie sien, vra ek onmiddellik: "Hoe gaan dit met Ron?"

Ná 'n paar dae begin ek om meer sinvolle gesprekke met my besoekers te voer en dit is interessant dat baie van hierdie interaksies outomaties plaasvind, en nie veel moeite van my verg nie. Soos 'n straalvliegtuig met 'n stuuroutomaat begin my brein op die een of ander manier hierdie al hoe meer bekende lewensterreine deurreis. Ek leer nou uit eie ondervinding wat ek dikwels as neurochirurg waargeneem het: Die brein is 'n merkwaardige orgaan.

Die onuitgesproke vraag in almal se gedagtes (ook in myne, in my helder oomblikke) is: Hoe volledig sal ek herstel? Sal ek niks oorhou van my siekte nie, of het die *E. coli* tog skade aangerig, soos al die dokters verwag het sou gebeur? Hierdie onsekerheid eis sy tol, veral by Holley, wat gedurig vrees dat my wonderbaarlike vordering skielik sal ophou en sy met net 'n deel van die man wat sy geken het, sou oorbly.

Tog keer daar elke dag steeds meer van daardie man terug. Taal. Herinneringe. Herkenning. 'n Sekere ondeunde streep waarvoor ek bekend was. Hoewel hulle bly is om weer my humorsin te sien terugkeer, is my twee susters nie altyd ingenome met hoe ek dit bewys nie. Maandagmiddag raak Phyllis my voorkop aan, en ek deins terug.

"Eina," skree ek. "Dis seer!"

Toe, met almal se verskrikte gesigte om my, sê ek: "Toe maar, ek

terg net!”

Almal is verbaas oor hoe vinnig ek herstel – behalwe ek. Ek het nog geen besef van hoe naby ek eintlik aan die dood was nie. Een vir een hervat familie en vriende hulle lewe, en ek groet hulle, salig onbewus van die tragedie wat ons net-net vrygespring het. Ek is so opgeruimd dat een van die neuroloë wat my toestand evalueer, van mening is dat ek “te eufories” is, en waarskynlik breinskade opgedoen het. Soos ek, was hierdie dokter lief om ’n strikdas te dra. My kommentaar teenoor my susters nadat hy vertrek het, is dat hy “verbasend affektief afgestomp is vir ’n strikdas-aficionado”.

Toe reeds het ek iets geweet wat al hoe meer mense om my uiteindelik sou besef. Ongeag wat enige dokter se mening was, ek het niks makeer nie en het geen breinskade gehad nie. Ek was heeltemal gesond.

Trouens – hoewel ek die enigste was wat dit nog geweet het – ek was die eerste keer in my hele lewe heeltemal en waarlik gesond.

26.

Spreading the News

"Truly well"—even if I did still have some work to do as far as the hardware side of things went. A few days after moving to outpatient rehab, I called Eben IV at school. He mentioned that he was working on a paper in one of his neuroscience courses. I volunteered to help but soon regretted doing so. It was much harder for me to focus on the subject than I had expected, and terminology I thought I had fully back suddenly refused to come to my mind. I realized with a shock just how far I still had to go.

But bit by bit that part came back, too. I'd wake up one day and find myself in possession of whole continents of scientific and medical knowledge that the day before I had been without. It was one of the strangest aspects of my experience: opening my eyes in the morning with even more of the nuts and bolts of a whole lifetime of education and experience at work again.

While my neuroscientist's knowledge crept back slowly and timidly, my memories of what had happened during that week out of my body loomed in my memory with astonishing boldness and clarity. What had happened outside the earthly realm had everything to do with the wild happiness I'd awakened with, and the bliss that continued to stick with me. I was deliriously happy because I was back with the people I loved. But I was also happy because—to state the matter as plainly as I can—I understood for the first time who I really was, and what kind of a world we inhabit.

I was wildly—and naïvely—eager to share these experiences, especially with my fellow doctors. After all, what I'd undergone altered my long-held beliefs of what the brain is, what consciousness is, even what life itself means—and doesn't mean. Who wouldn't be anxious to hear of my discoveries?

Quite a few people, as it turned out. Most especially, people with medical degrees.

Make no mistake, my doctors were very happy for me. "That's wonderful, Eben," they would say, echoing my response to countless patients of my own who, in the past, had tried to tell me about otherworldly experiences they'd undergone during surgery. "You were

very sick. Your brain was soaking in pus. We can't believe you're even here to talk about it. You know yourself what the brain can come up with when it's that far gone."

In short, they couldn't wrap their minds around what I was so desperately trying to share.

But then, how could I blame them? After all, I certainly wouldn't have understood it either—*before*.

26.

Goeie Nuus

"Waarlik gesond" – selfs al is daar nog werk om te doen om al die sisteme weer in werking te kry. 'n Paar dae nadat ek na buitepasiënte-rehabilitasie oorgeplaas is, bel ek Eben IV by die universiteit. Hy noem dat hy 'n werkstuk vir neurowetenskap moet doen. Ek bied aan om te help, maar besef gou dit was 'n fout. Dit is baie moeiliker om op die onderwerp te konsentreer as wat ek verwag het, en terminologie wat ek gedink het weer tot my beskikking is, is skielik uit my gedagtes. Met 'n skok besef ek hoe ver die pad is wat ek nog moet loop.

Maar bietjie vir bietjie kom daardie deel ook terug. Ek sal op 'n dag wakker word en besef ek onthou groot stukke wetenskaplike en mediese kennis wat ek die vorige dag nie gehad het nie. Dit is een van die vreemdste aspekte van my ondervinding: om in die oggend my oë oop te maak en bewus te raak daarvan dat nog stukkies van die legkaart van 'n hele lewe se leerproses en ondervinding teruggeplaas is.

Hoewel my wetenskaplike kennis stadig maar seker terugkeer het, was my herinneringe van wat gedurende daardie week buite my liggaam gebeur het verbasend duidelik en helder. Wat buite die aardse bestaan gebeur het, was die bron van my uitgelate blydskap en die salige gevoel wat my bygebly het. Ek was dolgelukkig omdat ek weer by my geliefdes was. Maar ek was ook gelukkig omdat – om dit so eenvoudig moontlik te stel – ek vir die eerste keer verstaan het wie ek werklik is en watter soort wêreld ons bewoon.

Ek was uitermate gretig om hierdie ervarings met ander te deel, veral met my kollegas, hoewel dit miskien naïef was van my. Alles wat ek meegemaak het, het my vorige opvattings van wat die brein is, wat bewussyn is, wat die lewe self is, verander. Wie sou nie belangstel om van my ontdekkings te hoor nie?

Heelwat mense, het dit uiteindelik geblyk. Veral mense met mediese

kwalifikasies.

Dit beteken nie dat my dokters nie bly was oor my herstel nie. “Dit is wonderlik, Eben,” was die antwoord gewoonlik, net soos ek in die verlede gereageer het op die verhale van pasiënte wat tydens chirurgie soortgelyke ervarings gehad het. “Jy was baie siek. Jou brein was geïnfekteer. Ons kan skaars glo dat jy dit oorleef het. Jy weet self waarmee die brein alles vorendag kan kom in so ’n toestand.”

Hulle kon nie verstaan wat ek so graag met hulle wou deel nie.

En hoe kon ek hulle kwalik neem? Ek sou dit self nie verstaan het nie – nie vantevore nie.

27.

Homecoming

I came home on November 25, 2008, two days before Thanksgiving, to a home full of gratitude. Eben IV drove overnight to surprise me the following morning. The last time he'd been with me I'd been in full coma, and he was still processing the fact that I was alive at all. He was so excited that he got a speeding ticket coming through Nelson County just north of Lynchburg.

I'd been up for hours, sitting in my easy chair by the fire in our cozy wood-paneled study, just thinking about everything I'd been through. Eben walked through the door just after 6 A.M. I stood up and gave him a long hug. He was stunned. The last time he'd seen me on Skype in the hospital, I'd been barely able to form a sentence. Now—other than still being on the thin side and having an IV line in my arm—I had returned to my favorite role in life—being Eben and Bond's dad.

Well, almost the same. Eben *was* aware of something else that was different about me, too. Later, Eben would say that when he first saw me that day, he was immediately taken with how "present" I was.

"You were so clear, so focused," he said. "It was as if there was a kind of light shining within you."

I wasted no time in sharing my thoughts.

"I am so eager to read all I can about this," I told him. "It was all so real, Eben, almost *too* real to be real, if that makes any sense. I want to write about it for other neuroscientists. And I want to read up on NDEs and what other people have experienced. I can't believe I never took any of it seriously, never listened to what my own patients told me. I was never curious enough to even look into any of the literature."

Eben didn't say anything, at first, but it was clear he was thinking about how to best advise his dad. He sat down across from me, and he urged me to see what should have been obvious.

"I believe you, Dad," he said. "But think about it. If you want this to be of value to others, the last thing you should do is read what other people have said."

"So what should I do?" I asked.

"Write it down. Write it all down—all your memories, as accurately as you can remember them. But don't read any books or articles about other peoples' near-death experiences, or physics, or cosmology. Not until you've written down what happened to you. Don't talk to Mom or anyone else about what happened while you were in coma, either—at least to the degree that you can steer clear of it. You can do that all you want later, right? Think how you always used to tell me that observation comes first, *then* interpretation. If you want what happened to you to be scientifically valuable, you need to record it as purely and accurately as you can *before* you start making any comparisons with what has happened to others."

It was, perhaps, the most sage advice anyone's ever given me—and I followed it. Eben was also quite right that what I deeply wanted, more than anything else, was to use my experiences to, hopefully, help others. The more my scientific mind returned, the more clearly I saw how radically what I'd learned in decades of schooling and medical practice conflicted with what I'd experienced, the more I understood that the mind and the personality (as some would call it, our soul or spirit) continue to exist beyond the body. I had to tell my story to the world.

For the next six weeks or so, most days went the same. I'd wake up around 2 or 2:30 A.M., feeling so ecstatic and energized by simply being alive that I would bound out of bed. I'd light a fire in the den, sit down in my old leather chair, and write. I tried to recall every detail of my journeys in and out of the Core, and what I had felt as I learned its many life-changing lessons.

Though *tried* isn't really the right word. Crisp and clear, the memories were right there, right where I had left them.

27.

Tuiskoms

Ek het op 25 November 2008 huis toe gegaan, twee dae voor Thanksgiving-dag, en daar was baie danksegging in ons gesin. Eben IV het deur die nag gery om my te verras. Die laaste keer dat hy by my was, was ek heeltemal in ’n koma, en hy moes nog gewoond raak aan die idee dat ek lewe. Hy was so opgewonde dat hy ’n spoedkaartjie gekry het in Nelson County, net noord van Lynchburg.

Ek was al wakker en het in ons gesellige studeerkamer in my leunstoel by die vuur sit en dink aan alles wat ek deurgemaak het, toe hy net na 6 vm instap. Toe ek hom sien, staan ek op en hou hom styf vas. Hy is stomgeslaan. Die laaste keer dat hy my in die hospitaal op Skype gesien het, kon ek skaars ’n sin praat. Nou is ek weer terug op my ou plek – weliswaar ’n bietjie maerder en met ’n IV-kateter in my arm – en weer dieselfde pa wat hy geken het.

Nou ja, byna dieselfde. Eben het aangevoel daar is iets anders omtrent my. Toe hy my later probeer beskryf het, het hy gesê ek was “volledig daar”. “Pa was so helder, so gefokus,” het hy gesê. “Dit was asof daar ’n soort lig van binne geskyn het.”

Ek vertel dadelik vir hom alles.

“Ek wil graag soveel as moontlik verder hieroor lees. Dit was alles so werklik, Eben, byna te werklik om waar te wees, as jy verstaan wat ek bedoel. Ek wil hieroor skryf, sodat ander neurowetenskaplikes dit kan lees. En ek wil oor NDE lees en meer agterkom oor wat ander mense ervaar het. Ek kan nie glo dat ek dit nie voorheen ernstig opgeneem het, toe my pasiënte daaroor gepraat het nie. Ek was nooit geïnteresseerd genoeg om die beskikbare literatuur te lees nie.”

Eben antwoord my nie dadelik nie, maar dit is duidelik dat hy besig is om daaroor na te dink. Hy gaan oorkant my sit en spel vir my die voor die hand liggende waarheid uit.

“Pa, ek glo jou. Maar dink bietjie mooi. As jy wil hê dit moet vir ander mense iets beteken, is die laaste ding wat jy moet doen om te

lees wat ander mense gesê het."

"Wat moet ek dan doen?"

"Skryf dit neer. Skryf dit eers alles neer – al jou herinneringe, so akkuraat as wat jy kan onthou. Moet niks anders lees nie, boeke of artikels oor ander mense se NDE's, of fisika of kosmologie nie. Nie voor jy eers alles neergeskryf het wat met jou gebeur het nie. Moet ook nie vir Mamma of vir enigiemand anders vra wat gebeur het terwyl jy in die koma was nie – ten minste, so ver as moontlik. Jy kan dit alles na die tyd doen. Onthou, jy het altyd vir my gesê, eers observasie en *dan* interpretasie. As jy wil hê jou ervaring moet wetenskaplik betekenisvol wees, moet jy dit so suiwer en akkuraat as moontlik aanteken voordat jy begin vergelykings tref met ander se ervarings."

Dit was die wysste raad wat iemand al ooit vir my gegee het, en ek het dit gevolg. Eben was ook heeltemal reg dat wat ek die graagste wou hê, meer as enigiets anders, was om my ondervinding te gebruik om ander te help, indien moontlik. Hoe meer ek my wetenskaplike denke ingespan het, hoe duideliker het ek besef hoe groot die gaping is tussen wat ek jare lank op skool en universiteit geleer het en wat ek ervaar het. En hoe beter het ek verstaan dat ons denke en persoonlikheid – die gees – bly voortbestaan buite die liggaam. Ek moes my verhaal aan die wêreld vertel.

Die volgende sowat ses weke verloop my dae min of meer dieselfde. Ek word om en by 2 of 2:30 vm wakker en voel so ekstaties en energiek, net om te weet ek lewe, dat ek uit die bed spring. Ek maak vuur in die studeerkamer, gaan sit in my ou leerstoel en skryf. Ek probeer om elke besonderheid van my reise na en van die Kern te onthou en hoe ek gevoel het terwyl ek die talle ingrypende lesse daar geleer het.

Maar *probeer* is nie juis die regte woord nie. Helder en duidelik – die herinneringe was daar, ek kon dit net oproep.

28.

The Ultra-Real

There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn't true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true.

—SØREN KIERKEGAARD (1813–1855)

In all this writing, one word seemed to come up again and again.

Real.

Never, before my coma, had I realized just how deceptive a word can be. The way I had been taught to think about it, both in medical school and in that school of common sense called life, is that something is either real (a car accident, a football game, a sandwich on the table in front of you) or it's not. In my years as a neurosurgeon, I'd seen plenty of people undergo hallucinations. I thought I knew just how terrifying unreal phenomena could be to those experiencing them. And during my few days of ICU psychosis, I'd had a chance to sample some impressively realistic nightmares as well. But once they passed, I quickly recognized those nightmares for the delusions they were: neuronal phantasmagoria stirred up by brain circuitry struggling to get running again.

But while I was in coma my brain hadn't been working improperly. *It hadn't been working at all.* The part of my brain that years of medical school had taught me was responsible for creating the world I lived and moved in and for taking the raw data that came in through my senses and fashioning it into a meaningful universe: that part of my brain was down, and out. And yet despite all of this, I had been alive, and aware, *truly aware,* in a universe characterized above all by love, consciousness, and reality. (There was that word again.) There was, for me, simply no arguing this fact. I knew it so completely that I ached.

What I'd experienced was more real than the house I sat in, more real than the logs burning in the fireplace. Yet there was no room for that reality in the medically trained scientific worldview that I'd spent years acquiring.

How was I going to create room for both of these realities to coexist?

28.

Die Ultra-Werklikheid

There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn't true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true.
SØREN KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855)

Terwyl ek my herinnering neerskryf, is daar een woord wat telkemale na vore kom.

Werklik.

Voor my koma het ek nooit besef hoe misleidend ’n woord kan wees nie. Soos ek geleer het om daaraan te dink, in my mediese opleiding en in die leerskool van die lewe, is iets óf werklik (‘n motorongeluk, ’n voetbalwedstryd, ’n toebroodjie op jou bord), óf dit is nie. In my ervaring as neurochirurg het ek dikwels mense gesien wat hallusinasies kry. Ek het gedink ek weet hoe vreesaanjaend onwerklike verskynsels kan wees vir iemand wat dit ervaar. En gedurende die paar dae van my ISE-psigose het ek self ’n hele klompie besonder werklike nagmerries ondervind. Maar toe dit eers verby was, het ek gou besef dat dit blote waan was: drogbeelde wat deur die senubane in my brein voortgebring is terwyl die brein weer aan die gang gekom het.

Maar terwyl ek in die koma was, het my brein nie net gedeeltelik gewerk nie. *Dit het glad nie gewerk nie.* Dié deel van my brein wat, soos ek in my mediese opleiding geleer het, sin maak van die wêreld waarin ek my bevind en die indrukke verwerk wat deur die sintuie waargeneem word, dié deel van my brein het nie gefunksioneer nie. En nogtans het ek gelewe en was ek bewus, waarlik bewus, van ’n bestaan gekenmerk deur liefde, bewussyn en werklikheid. (Weer daardie woord.) Vir my was hierdie feit onteenseglik waar. Ek het dit so volledig geweet dat dit seergemaak het.

Wat ek ervaar het, was meer werklik as die huis waarin ek gesit het, as die houtstompe in die kaggel. Tog was daar geen plek vir daardie werklikheid in die wetenskaplike wêreldbeskouing waarin ek opgelei is nie.

Hoe kon ek plek maak vir albei werklikhede om naas mekaar te bestaan?

29.

A Common Experience

Finally the day came when I had written down everything I could, every last memory of the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View, the Gateway, and the Core.

Then it was time to read. I plunged into the ocean of NDE literature—an ocean into which I'd never so much as dipped a toe before. It didn't take me long to realize that countless other people had experienced the things I had, both in recent years and centuries past. NDEs are not all the same, each one is unique—but the same elements show up again and again, and many I recognized from my own experience. Narratives of passing through a dark tunnel or valley into a bright and vivid landscape—ultra-real—were as old as ancient Greece and Egypt. Angelic beings—sometimes winged, sometimes not—went back, at least, to the ancient Near East—as did the belief that such beings were guardians who watched the activities of people on earth and greeted those people when they left it behind. The sense of being able to see in all directions simultaneously; the sensation of being above linear time—of being above *everything*, essentially, that I had previously thought of as defining the landscape of human life; the hearing of anthem-like music, which entered through one's whole being rather than simply one's ears; the direct and instantaneous reception of concepts that normally would have taken a very long time and a great deal of study to comprehend, without any struggle whatsoever . . . feeling the intensity of unconditional love.

Over and over, in the modern NDE accounts and in spiritual writings from earlier times, I'd feel the narrator struggling with the limitations of earthly language, trying to get the entirety of the fish they had hooked on board the boat of human language and ideas . . . and always, to one degree or another, failing.

And yet, with each attempt that fell frustratingly short of its goal, each person straining at language and ideas to get this enormity across to the reader, I'd understand the aim of the storyteller and what they'd hoped to convey in all of its boundaryless majesty, but simply couldn't.

Yes, yes, yes! I'd say to myself as I read. *I understand.*

These books, this material, had all, of course, been there before my experience. But I'd never *looked* at it. Not just in terms of reading, but in another way as well. Quite simply, I'd never held myself open to the idea that there might be anything genuine to the idea that something of us survives the death of the body. I was the quintessential good-natured, albeit skeptical, doctor. And as such, I can tell you that most skeptics aren't really skeptics at all. To be truly skeptical, one must actually examine something, and take it seriously. And I, like many doctors, had never taken the time to explore NDEs. I had simply "known" they were impossible.

I also went through the medical records of my time in coma—a time that was meticulously recorded, practically from the very start. Reviewing my scans just as I would have for a patient of my own, it became clear to me at last just how fantastically sick I had been.

Bacterial meningitis is unique among diseases in the manner in which it attacks the outer surface of the brain while leaving its deeper structures intact. The bacteria efficiently wreck the human part of our brain first, and finally prove fatal by attacking the deeper "housekeeping" structures common to other animals, deep beneath the human part. The other conditions that can damage the neocortex and cause unconsciousness—head trauma, stroke, brain hemorrhages or brain tumors—are not nearly as efficient at completely damaging the entire surface of the neocortex. These tend to involve only part of the neocortex, leaving other parts unscathed and able to function. Not only that, but instead of taking the neocortex alone out, they tend to also damage the deeper and more primitive parts of the brain as well. Given all of this, bacterial meningitis is arguably the best disease one could find if one were seeking to mimic human death without actually bringing it about. (Though of course, it usually does. The sad truth is that virtually everyone as sick as I was from bacterial meningitis never returns to tell the tale.) (See Appendix A.)

Though the experience is as old as history, "the near-death experience" (regardless of whether it was seen as something real or a baseless fantasy) only became a household term fairly recently. In the 1960s, new techniques were developed that allowed doctors to resuscitate patients who had suffered a cardiac arrest. Patients who in former times simply would have died were now pulled back into the land of the living. Unbeknownst to them, these physicians were, through their rescue efforts, producing a breed of trans-earthly voyagers: people who had glimpsed beyond the veil and returned to

tell about it. Today they number in the millions. Then, in 1975, a medical student named Raymond Moody published a book called *Life After Life,* in which he described the experience of a man named George Ritchie. Ritchie had "died" as a result of cardiac arrest as a complication of pneumonia and been out of his body for nine minutes. He traveled down a tunnel, visited heavenly and hellish regions, met a being of light that he identified as Jesus, and experienced feelings of peace and well-being that were so intense he had difficulty putting them into words. The era of the modern near-death experience was born.

I couldn't claim complete ignorance of Moody's book, but I had certainly never read it. I didn't need to, because I knew, first of all, that the idea that cardiac arrest represented some kind of close-to-death condition was nonsense. Much of the literature about near-death experiences concerns patients whose hearts stopped for a few minutes —usually after an accident or on the operating table. The idea that cardiac arrest constitutes death is outdated by about fifty years. Many laypeople still believe that if someone comes back from cardiac arrest, then they have "died" and returned to life, but the medical community long ago revised its definitions of death to center on the brain, not the heart (ever since brain death criteria, which rely on crucial findings of the patient's neurological examination, were established in 1968). Cardiac arrest is relevant to death only in terms of its effect on the brain. Within seconds of cardiac arrest, cessation of blood flow to the brain leads to widespread disruption of cooperative neural activity and loss of consciousness.

For half a century, surgeons have routinely stopped the heart for minutes to hours in cardiac surgery and occasionally neurosurgery, using cardiopulmonary bypass pumps, and sometimes cooling the brain to enhance its viability under such stresses. No brain death occurs. Even a person whose heart stops on the street might be spared brain damage, provided that someone starts performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation within four minutes and the heart can eventually be restarted. As long as oxygenated blood travels to the brain, the brain—and therefore the person—will stay alive, albeit transiently unconscious.

This piece of knowledge was all I needed to discount Moody's book without ever opening it. But now I did open it, and reading the stories Moody reported with the reference of what I myself had gone through made me completely shift my perspective. I had little doubt that at

least some of the people in these stories had genuinely left their physical bodies. The similarities with what I myself had experienced beyond the body were simply too overwhelming.

The more primitive parts of my brain—the housekeeping parts—functioned for all or most of my time in coma. But when it came to the part of my brain that every single brain scientist will tell you is responsible for the human side of me: well, that part was gone. I could see it on the scans, in the lab numbers, on my neurological exams—in all the data from my very closely recorded week in hospital. I quickly began to realize that mine was a technically near-impeccable near-death experience, perhaps one of the most convincing such cases in modern history. What really mattered about my case was not what happened to me personally, but the sheer, flat-out impossibility of arguing, from a medical standpoint, that it was all fantasy.

Describing what an NDE is is challenging, at best, but doing so in the face of a medical profession that refuses to believe it's possible at all makes it even harder. Due to my career in neuroscience and my own NDE, I now had the unique opportunity to make it more palatable.

29.

’n Algemene Verskynsel

Uiteindelik breek die dag aan dat ek alles neergeskryf het wat ek kon, elke herinnering van die Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief, die Poort en die Kern.

Nou is dit tyd om te lees. Ek begin my verdiep in die magdom NDE-literatuur – waarvan ek voorheen nie eens geweet het nie. Gou besef ek dat talle mense voor my dieselfde ervarings as ek gehad het, in die onlangse en ook die verre verlede. NDE’s is nie almal dieselfde nie, elkeen is uniek, maar daar is elemente wat keer op keer voorkom, waarvan ek baie uit my ervaring herken het. Verhale van ’n donker tonnel of vallei wat uitmond in ’n helder en superrealistiese landskap is reeds deur die vroeë Grieke en Egiptenare aangeteken. Engelagtige wesens, soms met vlerke en soms nie, was reeds in die ou beskawings van die Midde-Ooste bekend, asook die gedagte dat hierdie wesens bewaarengele was wat oor die aktiwiteite van mense op aarde gewaak het en hulle tegemoet gegaan het wanneer hulle die aardse bestaan verlaat. Die gewaarwording dat jy gelyktydig in alle rigtings kan sien; dat jy bokant lineêre tyd is, dat jy bokant alles is wat ek vantevore gedink het bepalend is vir ’n mens se lewe; die gewyde musiek wat jou hele wese vul; die direkte en onmiddellike bewuswording, sonder enige moeite, van konsepte wat normaalweg ’n baie lang tyd en intensiewe studie sou verg om te begryp; en die intense ervaring van onvoorwaardelike liefde.

Keer op keer, in die hedendaagse NDE-verslae en geestelike geskrifte van vroeër, kry ek die gevoel dat die verteller stry teen die beperkings van taal en nie daarin slaag om die ontwykende idee met woorde vas te vat nie – soos ’n hengelaar wat net nie die vis aan die hoek in die boot kan kry nie.

En tog, hoewel die skrywers se pogings om hulle ervarings te beskryf nie altyd geslaag is nie, en dit duidelik is dat hulle met taal en idees stoei om die volle omvang van hulle boodskap oor te dra, kan ek

tog verstaan wat die verteller se bedoeling is, en die grootsheid en omvang begryp van wat hulle probeer oordra.

Ja, ja, ja! dink ek, terwyl ek lees. *Ek verstaan.*

Hierdie boeke en inligting het natuurlik al bestaan voor my koma-ervaring. Maar ek het nooit daarvan kennis geneem nie. Nie net in die sin dat ek dit nie gelees het nie, maar ook dat ek my nie oopgestel het vir die moontlikheid dat dit kan waar wees dat 'n deel van ons voortlewe nadat die liggaam gesterf het nie. Ek was die tipiese goedgeaarde maar skeptiese dokter. En dan moet ek byvoeg dat ek ook nie skepties was in die ware sin van die woord nie. Om waarlik skepties te kan wees, moet jy iets behoorlik ondersoek en ernstig oorweeg. Soos baie dokters het ek nooit veel aandag gegee aan NDE nie. Ek het sommer net aanvaar dat dit onmoontlik is.

As deel van my leeswerk het ek ook die mediese verslae van my tyd in koma nagegaan – 'n tyd wat noukeurig aangeteken is, so te sê reg van die begin af. Toe ek die breinskanderings nagaan, soos ek dié van 'n pasiënt sou nagaan, word dit vir my duidelik hoe ongelooflik siek ek was.

Bakteriële meningitis is 'n unieke siekte in dié sin dat dit die buitenste oppervlak van die brein aanval, terwyl die dieper strukture bewaar bly. Die bakterieë val eers die meer gevorderde deel van ons brein aan en wanneer dit uiteindelik die dieper "huishoudelike" strukture aanval, wat ons met ander diere gemeen het, is dit noodlottig. Ander toestande wat die neokorteks beskadig, soos kopbeserings, beroerte, breinbloeding of breingewasse, tas nie die hele oppervlak van die neokorteks aan nie, maar slegs 'n deel. Die res van die neokorteks kan steeds funksioneer. Die dieper en meer primitiewe lae van die aangetaste deel word dikwels ook beskadig. As ons hierdie verskil in ag neem, blyk dit dat bakteriële meningitis waarskynlik die siekte is wat die dood die beste kan naboots sonder dat dit werklik gebeur. In die meeste gevalle is dit egter noodlottig – die meeste pasiënte met my simptome herstel nooit van die siekte nie. (Sien bylaag A.)

Hoewel dit reeds van die vroegste tye waargeneem is, het die term nabydood-ervaring (NDE) redelik onlangs eers in algemene gebruik gekom. In die 1960's is nuwe tegnieke ontwikkel wat dokters in staat stel om pasiënte wat hartstilstand gehad het te resussiteer. Pasiënte

wat voorheen sou gesterf het, word nou na die land van die lewendes teruggebring. Sonder dat hulle dit besef, het hierdie dokters met hulle reddingspogings ’n nuwe soort boaardse reis moontlik gemaak: Hierdie pasiënte het ’n kykie gekry in die bestaan aan die oorkant en kon terugkom om daarvan te vertel. Daar is nou reeds miljoene mense met wie dit gebeur het. In 1975 het ’n mediese student, Raymond Moody, ’n boek geskryf met die titel *Life after Life*, waarin hy die ervarings van George Ritchie beskryf. Ritchie het “gesterf” ná ’n hartstilstand as gevolg van pneumonie en was nege minute lank buite sy liggaam. Hy het in ’n tonnel afbeweeg, hemelse en helse streke besoek, ’n stralende wese ontmoet wat hy as Jesus geïdentifiseer het en gevoelens van vrede en welsyn ervaar wat hy skaars onder woorde kon bring. Dit was die begin van die hedendaagse NDE.

Ek was nie onbewus van Moody se boek nie, maar het dit nooit gelees nie. Dit was nie vir my nodig nie, want ek het geweet dat die idee dat hartstilstand ’n soort nabydood-ervaring kan teweeg bring blote onsin is. Baie van die literatuur oor nabydood-ervaring verwys na pasiënte wat ’n paar minute lank ’n hartstilstand gehad het – gewoonlik ná ’n ongeluk of op die operasietafel. Die opvatting dat hartstilstand die dood beteken, is egter reeds vyftig jaar verouder. Baie leke glo nog dat as iemand ná ’n hartstilstand terugkom, dat hulle “dood’ was en nou weer lewe. Medies gesproke hou die definisie van die dood egter verband met brein en nie met die hart nie. Die kriteria vir breindood, wat in 1968 vasgestel is, berus op kritieke bevindings van ’n neurologiese ondersoek van die pasiënt. Hartstilstand hou verband met die dood in dié mate dat dit die brein affekteer. Binne sekondes ná ’n hartstilstand staak die bloedvloei na die brein en word die senuwee-aktiwiteit in die brein ontwrig, wat verlies van bewussyn veroorsaak.

Die afgelope vyftig jaar is dit reeds algemene praktyk tydens hartchirurgie en soms tydens neurochirurgie om die hart ’n paar minute lank te stop deur kardiopulmonêre omleiding te gebruik en soms die brein af te koel (om dit meer lewensvatbaar onder stres te maak). Breindood word nie veroorsaak nie. Selfs iemand wat op straat ’n hartstilstand kry, kan breinskade vryspring indien kardiopulmonêre resussitasie binne vier minute toegepas word en die hart uiteindelik weer begin klop. Solank suurstofryke bloed na die brein vloei, sal die

brein, en dus die persoon, bly lewe, selfs in ’n bewustelose toestand.

Met hierdie kennis het ek by voorbaat Moody se boek afgeskryf, sonder dat ek dit eens oopgemaak het. Maar nou het ek dit wel gelees, en Moody se weergawe van ander se ervarings teen die agtergrond van wat ek self ervaar het, het my perspektief heeltemal verander. Ek was oortuig dat van die beskrywings van buiteliggaamlike ervarings sonder twyfel eg was. Die ooreenkoms met wat ek self ervaar het, was net te oorweldigend.

Die meer primitiewe dele van my brein – die huishoudelike dele – het tydens my koma aanhou funksioneer. Maar die ander deel van my brein, wat vir die meer gevorderde funksies verantwoordelik is, daardie deel was weg. Ek kon dit op die skanderings sien, in die laboratoriumuitslae, in die verslae van my neurologiese ondersoeke – al die data wat gedurende die week aangeteken is. Ek het gou besef dat my ervaring ’n byna volmaakte nabydood-ervaring was, miskien een van die mees oortuigende gevalle in onlangse geskiedenis. Wat werklik in my geval van belang is, is nie wat met my persoonlik gebeur het nie, maar die totale onhoudbaarheid daarvan om uit ’n mediese oogpunt aan te voer dat dit alles verbeeldingsvlugte was.

Dit is moeilik genoeg om ’n NDE te beskryf, maar om dit te probeer doen terwyl die mediese beroep weier om te glo dat dit moontlik is, maak dit nog moeiliker. Danksy my loopbaan in neurowetenskap en my eie NDE, is ek nou in ’n unieke posisie om dit meer aanvaarbaar te maak.

30.

Back from the Dead

> *And the drawing near of Death, which alike levels all, alike impresses all with a last revelation, which only an author from the dead could adequately tell.*
>
> —HERMAN MELVILLE (1819–1891)

Everywhere I went in those first few weeks, people looked at me like I had risen from the grave. I ran into one doctor who had been present at the hospital the day I'd come in. He hadn't been directly involved in my care, but he'd gotten a good eyeful when I was rolled into the ER that first morning.

"How can you even *be* here?" he asked, summarizing the medical community's basic question about me. "Are you Eben's twin brother, or what?"

I smiled, reached out, and shook his hand firmly, to let him know it was really I.

Though he was of course joking about whether I had a twin brother, this doctor was actually making an important point. For all intents and purposes I still *was* two people, and if I was going to do what I'd told Eben IV I wanted to do—use my experience to help others—I would have to reconcile my NDE with my scientific understanding and knit those two people together.

My memory went back to a phone call I'd received one morning several years before, from the mother of a patient who'd called as I was examining a digital map of a tumor I was to remove later that day. I'll call the woman Susanna. Susanna's late husband, whom I will call George, had been a patient of mine with a brain tumor. In spite of everything we did, he died within a year and a half of diagnosis. Now Susanna's daughter was ill with several brain metastases from breast cancer. Her prospects of survival beyond a few months were remote. It wasn't a good time to take a call—my mind was completely absorbed in the digital image in front of me, and with mapping out exactly what my strategy was going to be to go in and remove it without doing

damage to the brain tissue around it. But I stayed on the line with Susanna because I knew that she was trying to think of something—anything—to allow her to cope.

I'd always believed that when you're under the burden of a potentially fatal illness, softening the truth is fine. To prevent a terminal patient from trying to grab on to a little fantasy to help them deal with the possibility of death is like withholding pain-killing medication. It was an extraordinarily heavy load to carry, and I owed Susanna every second of attention she asked.

"Dr. A," Susanna said, "my daughter had the most incredible dream. Her father came to her in it. He told her everything was going to be all right, that she didn't need to worry about dying."

It was the kind of thing I'd heard from patients countless times—the mind doing what it can to soothe itself in an unbearably painful situation. I told her it sounded like a wonderful dream.

"But the most incredible thing, Dr. A, is what he was wearing. A yellow shirt—and a fedora!"

"Well, Susanna," I said good-naturedly, "I guess there are no dress codes in Heaven."

"No," Susanna said. "That's not it. Early on in our relationship, when we were first dating, I gave George a yellow shirt. He liked to wear it with a fedora that I also gave him. But the shirt and hat were lost when our luggage failed to arrive on our honeymoon. He already knew by that time how much I loved him in that shirt and hat, but we never replaced them."

"I'm sure Christina had heard lots of wonderful stories about that shirt and hat, Susanna," I said. "And about your early times together . . ."

"No," she laughed. "That's what's so wonderful. That was our little secret. We knew how ridiculous it would sound to someone else. We never talked about that shirt and fedora after they were lost. Christina never heard one peep from us about them. Christina was so afraid of dying, and now she knows she has nothing to fear, nothing at all.

What Susanna was telling me, I discovered in my reading, was a variety of dream confirmation that happens quite often. But I hadn't had my NDE when I'd gotten that call, and at the time I knew perfectly well that what Susanna was telling me was a grief-induced fantasy. Over the course of my career, I had treated many patients who had undergone unusual experiences while in coma or during surgery. Whenever one of these people narrated an unusual experience

like Susanna's, I was always completely sympathetic. And I was quite sure these experiences had indeed happened—in their minds. The brain is the most sophisticated—and temperamental—organ we possess. Tinker around with it, lessen the degree of oxygen it gets by a few torr (a unit of pressure), and the owner of that brain is going to experience an alteration in their reality. Or, more precisely, their personal experience of reality. Throw in all the physical trauma and all the medications that someone with a brain malady is likely to be on, and you have a virtual guarantee that, should a patient have any memories when they come back around, those memories are going to be pretty unusual. With a brain affected by a deadly bacterial infection and mind-altering medications, *anything* could happen. Anything, that is—*except* the ultra-real experience I had in coma.

Susanna, I realized with the kind of jolt that comes when you see something that should have been obvious, wasn't calling to be comforted by me that day. She really and truly was trying to comfort me. But I hadn't been able to see that. I'd thought I was doing Susanna a kindness by pretending, in my wan, distracted way, to believe her story. But I wasn't. And looking back on that conversation and dozens of others like it, I realized just what a long road I had in front of me if I was going to convince my fellow doctors that what I'd been through was real.

30.

Terugkeer uit die Dood

And the drawing near of Death, which alike levels all, alike impresses all with a last revelation, which only an author from the dead could adequately tell.
HERMAN MELVILLE (1819-1991)

Oral waar ek daardie eerste paar weke gaan, kyk mense my aan asof ek uit die graf opgestaan het. Ek loop ’n dokter raak wat daar was toe ek by die noodeenheid toegelaat is. Hy was nie direk betrokke by my versorging nie, maar het gesien hoe ek lyk toe ek daardie oggend ingebring is.

“Hoe is dit moontlik dat jy hier is?” vra hy toe hy my sien, die basiese vraag wat my mediese kollegas hulle afvra. “Is jy Eben se tweelingbroer, of wat?”

Ek glimlag en gee hom ’n stewige handdruk, net om te wys dit is werklik ek.

Hoewel dit natuurlik as ’n grap bedoel is, het hierdie dokter eintlik ’n belangrike punt gemaak toe hy vra of ek Eben se tweelingbroer is. In ’n sekere opsig was ek nog twee mense, en as ek werklik wou doen wat ek vir Eben IV gesê het ek wil doen – my ervaring gebruik om ander te help – dan sou ek my NDE met my wetenskaplike kennis moes versoen en dié twee mense met mekaar moes vereenselwig.

Ek het onwillekeurig gedink aan ’n telefoonoproep wat ek ’n aantal jare vantevore van die ma van ’n pasiënt ontvang het. Toe sy bel, was ek besig om ’n digitale kaart te ondersoek van ’n tumor wat ek later daardie dag moes verwyder. Ek sal die vrou Susan noem. Susan se oorlede man, wat ek George sal noem, was vroeër my pasiënt en het ’n breintumor gehad. Hoewel ons alles in ons vermoë gedoen het, het hy 18 maande na sy diagnose gesterf. Nou het Susan se dogter verskeie metastases na die brein gehad as gevolg van borskanker. Haar kans om meer as ’n paar maande te lewe was skraal. Dit was nie ’n geleë tyd vir ’n oproep nie – ek was verdiep in die digitale beeld voor my en besig om my strategie te beplan, hoe om die gewas te verwyder met die min moontlike skade aan die omliggende weefsel. Maar ek het met

Susan gepraat omdat ek geweet het sy het ondersteuning nodig om haar dogter se siekte te verwerk.

Ek was altyd van mening dat as die swaard van ’n lewensbedreigende siekte oor mens hang, daar niks mee verkeerd is om die waarheid ’n bietjie te versag nie. Om ’n terminale pasiënt daarvan te weerhou om die moontlikheid van die dood met ’n bietjie fantasie te besweer is soos om pynverdowende medikasie te weerhou. Susan het ’n besonder swaar las gedra en ek was dit aan haar verskuldig om aan haar aandag te gee.

“Dr Alexander, my dogter het ’n ongelooflike droom gehad. Haar pa het aan haar verskyn. Hy het vir haar gesê alles is reg en sy moet nie bang wees om te sterf nie.”

Ek het talle soortgelyke verhale van pasiënt gehoor – niks meer as verbeeldingsvlugte van iemand wat troos soek in ’n ondraaglike situasie nie. Ek het geantwoord dat dit ’n wonderlike droom was.

“Maar die mees ongelooflike ding, dr Alexander, was wat hy aangehad het. ’n Geel hemp – en ’n vilthoed!”

“Wel, Susan, daar is seker nie kleredragreëls in die hemel nie,” het ek geskerts.

“Nee, maar dis nie die punt nie. Toe ek en George mekaar leer ken het, het ek vir hom ’n geel hemp gekoop. Hy het dit graag saam met die vilthoed gedra, wat ek ook vir hom gegee het. Maar die hemp en hoed het op ons wittebroodsreis saam met ons bagasie weggeraak. Ons was al twee baie lief vir daardie uitrusting van hom, maar ons het dit nooit vervang nie.”

“Susan, julle het seker dikwels vir Christina vertel van julle tye saam, van voor sy gebore is, en van die hemp en hoed wat weggeraak het …”

“Dis juis die ding, dit was net iets tussen ons twee, ons het nooit vir iemand daarvan vertel nie. Dit was eintlik ’n bietjie laf, en ons het gedink ander mense sou dink dis verspot. Ons het beslis nooit vir Christina daarvan vertel nie. Christina was so bang vir die dood, maar nou weet sy daar’s niks om te vrees nie.”

In my latere leeswerk het ek besef dat wat Susan my vertel het, ’n soort droombevestiging was wat dikwels gebeur. Maar toe ek daardie oproep ontvang, het ek nog nie ’n NDE gehad nie, en ek was oortuig dat Christina se droom bloot die gevolg was van haar ontstelde

gemoed. In die loop van my werk as chirurg het pasiënte dikwels ongewone ervarings tydens operasies of in koma gehad. As ’n pasiënt van so ’n buitengewone ervaring vertel het, soos dié van Christina, was ek altyd heel simpatiek. En ek was seker dat hierdie ervarings werklik gebeur het – in hulle gedagtes. Die brein is ’n hoogs ontwikkelde – en temperamentele – orgaan. As daarmee gepeuter word, of die suurstoftoevoer word met ’n paar torr (’n drukeenheid) verminder, sal die persoon se brein ’n veranderde werklikheid ervaar. Of meer akkuraat gestel, hulle persoonlike gewaarwording van die werklikheid sal verander. Voeg daarby die liggaamlike trauma en medikasie waaraan so ’n persoon waarskynlik blootgestel is, dan is dit byna seker dat enige herinneringe wat die pasiënt het wanneer hy of sy weer bykom, vreemd of onwerklik sal wees. Indien die brein deur ’n dodelike bakteriële infeksie en psigotropiese middels aangetas is, kan enigiets gebeur. Enigiets – behalwe die ultra-werklike ervaring wat ek in koma gehad het.

Terugskouend het ek met ’n skok besef – die soort skok wanneer mens skielik iets insien wat vir jou duidelik moes gewees het – dat Susan nie daardie dag gebel het om deur my getroos te word nie. Sy het inderwaarheid gebel om my te troos. Maar ek was nie in staat om dit in te sien nie. Ek het gedink ek bewys haar ’n guns deur op ’n halfhartige manier voor te gee dat ek haar verhaal glo. Maar dit was nie ek wat haar ’n guns bewys het nie. En toe ek terugdink aan daardie gesprek en baie ander soortgelyke gesprekke, het ek besef hoe lank die pad nog is voor ek my kollegas sou oortuig dat wat ek ervaar het, werklik was.

31.

Three Camps

> *I maintain that the human mystery is incredibly demeaned by scientific reductionism, with its claim in promissory materialism to account eventually for all of the spiritual world in terms of patterns of neuronal activity. This belief must be classed as a superstition . . . . we have to recognize that we are spiritual beings with souls existing in a spiritual world as well as material beings with bodies and brains existing in a material world.*
>
> —SIR JOHN C. ECCLES (1903–1997)

When it came to NDEs, there were three basic camps. There were the believers: either people who had undergone an NDE themselves or who simply found such experiences easy to accept. Then, of course, there were the staunch unbelievers (like the old me). These people didn't generally classify themselves as unbelievers, however. They simply "knew" that the brain generated consciousness and wouldn't hold still for crazy ideas of mind beyond the body (unless they were good-naturedly comforting someone, as I had thought I'd been doing with Susanna that day).

Then there was the middle group. In here there were all kinds of people who had heard about NDEs, either by reading about them or—because they're extraordinarily common—by having a friend or relative who had undergone one. These people in the middle were the ones my story could really help. The news that NDEs bring is life-transforming. But when a person who is potentially open to hearing about an NDE asks a doctor or a scientist—in our society the official gatekeepers on the matter of what's real and what isn't—they are all too often told, gently but firmly, that NDEs are fantasies: products of a brain struggling to hold on to life, and nothing more.

As a doctor who'd undergone what I had, I could tell a different story. And the more I thought about it, the more I felt I had a duty to do just that.

One by one, I ran down the suggestions that I knew my colleagues,

and I myself in the old days, would have offered to "explain" what happened to me. (For more details, see my summary of neuroscientific hypotheses, Appendix B.)

Was my experience a primitive brainstem program that evolved to ease terminal pain and suffering—possibly a remnant of "feigned-death" strategies used by lower mammals? I discounted that one right out of the gate. There was, quite simply, no way that my experiences, with their intensely sophisticated visual and aural levels, and their high degree of perceived meaning, were the product of the reptilian portion of my brain.

Was it a distorted recall of memories from deeper parts of my limbic system, the part of the brain that fuels emotional perception? Again, no—without a functioning neocortex the limbic system could not produce visions with the clarity and logic I experienced.

Could my experience have been a kind of psychedelic vision produced by some of the (many) drugs I was on? Again, all these drugs work with receptors in the neocortex. And with no neocortex functioning, there was no canvas for these drugs to work on.

How about REM intrusion? This is the name of a syndrome (related to "rapid eye movement" or REM sleep, the phase in which dreams occur) in which natural neurotransmitters such as serotonin interact with receptors in the neocortex. Sorry again. REM intrusion needs a functioning neocortex to happen, and I didn't have one.

Then there was the hypothetical phenomenon known as a "DMT dump." In this situation, the pineal gland, reacting to the stress of a perceived threat to the brain, produces a substance called DMT (or N,N-dimethyltryptamine). DMT is structurally similar to serotonin and can bring on an extremely intense psychedelic state. I'd had no personal experience with DMT—and still haven't—but I have no argument with those who say it can produce a very powerful psychedelic experience; maybe one with genuine implications for our understanding of what consciousness, and reality, actually are.

However, it remains a fact that the portion of the brain that DMT affects (the neocortex) was, in my case, not there to be affected. So in terms of "explaining" what happened to me, the DMT-dump hypothesis came up as radically short as the other chief candidates for explanations of my experience, and for the same key reason. Hallucinogens affect the neocortex, and my neocortex wasn't available to be affected.

The final hypothesis I looked at was that of the "reboot

phenomenon." This would explain my experience as an assembly of essentially disjointed memories and thoughts left over from before my cortex went completely down. Like a computer restarting and saving what it could after a system-wide failure, my brain would have pieced together my experience from these leftover bits as best it could. This might occur on restarting the cortex into consciousness after a prolonged system-wide failure, as in my diffuse meningitis. But this seems most unlikely given the intricacies and interactivity of my elaborate recollections. Because I experienced the nonlinear nature of time in the spiritual world so intensely, I can now understand why so much writing on the spiritual dimension can seem distorted or simply nonsensical from our earthly perspective. In the worlds above this one, time simply doesn't behave as it does here. It's not necessarily one-thing-after-another in those worlds. A moment can seem like a lifetime, and one or several lifetimes can seem like a moment. But though time doesn't behave ordinarily (in our terms) in the worlds beyond, that doesn't mean it's jumbled, and my own recollections from my time in coma were anything but. My most this-worldly anchors in my experience, temporally speaking, were my interactions with Susan Reintjes when she contacted me on my fourth and fifth nights, and the appearance, toward the end of my journey, of those six faces. Any other appearance of temporal simultaneity between events on earth and my journey beyond it are, you might say, purely conjectural!

The more I learned of my condition, and the more I sought, using the current scientific literature, to explain what had happened, the more I came up spectacularly short. Everything—the uncanny clarity of my vision, the clearness of my thoughts as pure conceptual flow—suggested higher, not lower, brain functioning. But my higher brain had not been around to do that work.

The more I read of the "scientific" explanations of what NDEs are, the more I was shocked by their transparent flimsiness. And yet I also knew with chagrin that they were exactly the ones that the old "me" would have pointed to vaguely if someone had asked me to "explain" what an NDE is.

But people who weren't doctors couldn't be expected to know this. If what I'd undergone had happened to someone—anyone—else, it would have been remarkable enough. But that it had happened to me . . . Well, saying that it had happened "for a reason" made me a little uneasy. There was enough of the old doctor in me to know how

outlandish—how grandiose, in fact—that sounded. But when I added up the sheer unlikelihood of all the details—and especially when I considered how precisely perfect a disease *E. coli* meningitis was for taking my cortex down, and my rapid and complete recovery from almost certain destruction—I simply had to take seriously the possibility that it really and truly *had* happened for a reason.

That only made me feel a greater sense of responsibility to tell my story right.

I had always made it a point of pride to keep up on the latest medical literature in my field, and to contribute as well when I had something of value to add. That I had been rocketed out of this world and into another one was news—genuine medical news—and now that I was back, I was not going to sell it short. Medically speaking, that I had recovered completely was a flat-out impossibility, a medical miracle. But the real story lay in where I had been, and I had a duty not just as a scientist and a profound respecter of the scientific method, but also as a healer to tell that story. A story—a true story—can heal as much as medicine can. Susanna had known that when she called me that day in my office. And I'd experienced as much myself when I'd heard back from my birth family. What had happened to me was healing news, too. What kind of a healer would I be if I didn't share it?

A little over two years after returning from coma, I visited a close friend and colleague who chairs one of the foremost academic neuroscience departments in the world. I've known John (not his real name) for decades and consider him a wonderful human being and a first-rate scientist.

I told John some of the story of my spiritual journey deep in coma, and he looked quite amazed. Not amazed at how crazy I now was, but as if he was finally making sense of something that had mystified him for a long time.

It turned out that about a year earlier, John's father was nearing the end of a five-year illness. He was incapacitated, demented, in pain, and wanted to die.

"Please," his father had begged John from his deathbed. "Give me some pills, or something. I can't go on like this."

Then suddenly his father became more cogent than he had been in two years, as he discussed some deep observations about his life and about their family. He then shifted his gaze and began talking to the air at the foot of his bed. Listening, John realized that his father was

talking to his deceased mother, who had died sixty-five years before, when John's father was just a teenager. He had barely mentioned her during John's life but now was having a joyous and animated discussion with her. John could not see her but was absolutely convinced that her spirit was there, welcoming his father's spirit home.

After a few minutes of this, John's father turned back to him, a completely different look in his eye. He was smiling, and clearly very much at peace, more than John could ever remember seeing in him before.

"Go to sleep, Dad," John found himself saying. "Just let go. It's okay."

His father did just that. Closing his eyes, he drifted off with a look of complete peace on his face. Shortly thereafter, he passed on.

John felt the encounter between his father and his departed grandmother was very real, but he had not known what to do with it because, as a doctor, he knew such things were "impossible." Many others have seen that astonishing clarity of mind that often comes to demented elderly people just before they pass on, just as John had seen in his father (a phenomenon known as "terminal lucidity"). There was no neuroscientific explanation for *that*. Hearing my story seemed to give him a license he had been longing for someone to give him: the license to believe what he had seen with his own eyes—to *know* that deep and comforting truth: that our eternal spiritual self is more real than anything we perceive in this physical realm, and has a divine connection to the infinite love of the Creator.

31.

Drie Kampe

I maintain that the human mystery is incredibly demeaned by scientific reductionism, with its claim in promissory materialism to account eventually for all of the spiritual world in terms of patterns of neuronal activity. This belief must be classed as a superstition … we have to recognize that we are spiritual beings with souls existing in a spiritual world as well as material beings with bodies and brains existing in a material world.

SIR JOHAN ECCLES (1903-1997)

Daar is drie hoofkampe as dit by NDE's kom. Daar is die bekeerdes: mense wat self 'n NDE gehad het of wat so iets maklik kan aanvaar. Dan is daar die stoere ongelowiges (soos die ou ek). Hierdie mense beskou hulself egter nie sonder meer as ongelowiges nie. Hulle aanvaar dit net as vanselfsprekend dat die brein die setel van die bewussyn is en heg nie enige waarde aan idees oor die gees buite die liggaam nie (tensy hulle met goeie bedoelings iemand probeer troos, soos ek met Susan wou doen).

Dan is daar die middelgroep. Dit sluit verskillende mense in wat al van NDE gehoor het, deur daarvan te lees of – omdat dit redelik algemeen voorkom – deurdat hulle iemand ken wat al so 'n ervaring gehad het. Dit is hierdie groep in die middel wat by my verhaal kan baat. Die nuus wat NDE's bring, is ingrypend. Maar wanneer iemand wat moontlik ontvanklik sou wees vir die gedagte van 'n NDE met 'n dokter of wetenskaplike gesels – in ons gemeenskap is hulle die hekwagters oor wat werklik is en wat nie – dan word hulle gewoonlik vriendelik dog ferm ingelig dat NDE verbeeldingsvlugte is produkte van 'n brein wat probeer vasklou aan die lewe.

As 'n dokter, en met my ervaring van NDE, kon ek 'n ander verhaal vertel. En hoe meer ek daaroor nagedink het, hoe meer het ek gevoel dit is my plig om dit te doen.

Een vir een het ek die moontlike verklarings vir my ervaring oorweeg, verklarings wat ek geweet het my kollegas, en ek self in die ou dae, vir my ervaring sou aanvoer. (Vir meer besonderhede, sien my opsomming van neurowetenskaplike hipoteses, bylaag B.)

Is my ervaring as die produk van evolusie deur die primitiewe

breinstam voortgebring om terminale pyn en lyding te verlig – moontlik ’n oorblyfsel van die skyndood-strategieë wat deur die laer soogdiere gebruik word? Daardie teorie het ek uit die staanspoor verwerp. Dit was eenvoudig nie moontlik dat my gewaarwordings, met hulle hoogs gevorderde oudiovisuele vlakke, en die hoë graad van betekenisonderskeiding, die produk van die primitiewe deel van my brein kon wees nie.

Was dit verwronge herinneringe afkomstig van die dieper gedeeltes van my limbiese stelsel, die deel van die brein wat emosionele gewaarwording huisves? Die antwoord moet weer nee wees – sonder ’n funksionerende neokorteks sou die limbiese sisteem nie die helder en duidelike visioene kon produseer wat ek ervaar het nie.

Kon my ervaring ’n soort psigedeliese visioen wees, voortgebring deur sommige van die (baie) middels waarmee ek behandel is? Die middels werk almal op reseptore in die neokorteks. En as die neokorteks nie funksioneer nie, kan die middels nie daarop inwerk nie.

Wat van REM-indringing? Dit is ’n sindroom wat verband hou met REM-slaap (“rapid eye movement sleep” of paradoksale slaap), die fase waarin drome voorkom. Tydens hierdie fase vind interaksie plaas tussen natuurlike neurotransmitters soos serotonien en reseptore in die neokorteks. Onmoontlik. REM-indringing veronderstel ’n funksionerende neokorteks, waaroor ek nie beskik het nie.

Dan is daar die hipotetiese verskynsel van DMT-storting. Volgens hierdie hipotese reageer die pineaalklier op ’n bedreiging vir die brein en skei DMT af (of N,N-dimetieltriptamien). Die struktuur van DMT stem ooreen met dié van serotonien en kan ’n intense psigedeliese toestand meebring. Ek het geen persoonlike ervaring van DMT nie, maar ek het geen rede om die aanspraak te verwerp dat dit ’n sterk hallusinerende uitwerking het nie. Dit kan selfs ingrypende implikasies hê vir ons begrip van wat bewussyn en werklikheid is. Die feit bly staan dat die deel van die brein wat deur DMT geaffekteer word, naamlik die neokorteks, in my geval nie gefunksioneer het nie en dus nie geaffekteer kon word nie. Die DMT-hipotese kon dus nie my ervaring verklaar nie, om dieselfde basiese rede as die ander moontlike verklarings. Hallusinogene affekteer die neokorteks, en my neokorteks was nie beskikbaar om geaffekteer te word nie.

Die laaste hipotese wat ek oorweeg het, beskou was die sogenaamde "herlaaiverskynsel". Hiervolgens word my ervaring as 'n versameling los, onsamehangende herinneringe en gedagtes wat oorgebly het net voordat my korteks ophou funksioneer het. Soos 'n rekenaar wat herlaai en soveel data as moontlik probeer herwin na 'n stelselfaling, sou my brein hierdie ervaring uit die oorblewe stukkies en brokkies in my bewussyn saamgestel het. Dit kan gebeur wanneer die korteks weer bykom na 'n langdurige verlies van bewussyn, soos met my verspreide meningitis. Dit lyk egter heel onwaarskynlik as mens die ingewikkelde en interaktiewe aard van my uitgebreide herinneringe in ag neem. Omdat ek die nielineêre aard van tyd in die geestelike wêreld so intens ervaar het, kan ek nou verstaan waarom soveel wat oor die geestelike dimensie geskryf word, uit ons aardse perspektief so vreemd en onsinnig voorkom. In die wêrelde bokant hierdie een verloop tyd anders as hier. Dit is nie noodwendig een ding na die ander nie. 'n Oomblik kan soos 'n leeftyd voel, en een of verskeie leeftye soos 'n oomblik. Maar, hoewel tyd (in ons terme) in die ander wêrelde nie soos normaalweg verloop nie, beteken dit nie dat dit deurmekaar is nie. My eie herinneringe van my tyd in die koma is allesbehalwe deurmekaar. My aardse tyd-ankers vir my ervaring is my interaksies met Susan Reintjes toe sy op die vierde en vyfde nag met my kontak gemaak het en die verskyning van die ses gesigte aan die einde van my reis. Enige ander ooreenstemming tussen gebeure hier op aarde en my reis daarbuite, kan mens sê, is blote gissings.

Hoe meer ek oor my toestand geleer het en hoe meer ek probeer het om met behulp van die hedendaagse wetenskaplike literatuur 'n verklaring te vind vir wat gebeur het, hoe verder was ek van 'n antwoord. Alles – die besondere duidelikheid van my visioen, die helderheid van my gedagtes as 'n konseptuele stroom – dui op 'n hoër en nie 'n laer funksionering van die brein nie. Maar my hoër brein was nie daar om die werk te doen nie.

Die sogenaamde wetenskaplike verklarings vir NDE's wat ek gelees het, was vir my deursigtig en onvoldoende, en hoewel dit nou vir my skokkend en onaanvaarbaar is, het ek met skaamte besef dat dit die verklarings was waarop "die ou ek" my sou beroep as ek moes verduidelik wat 'n NDE is.

Maar 'n mens kan nie verwag dat iemand wat nie 'n mediese

agtergrond het, dit noodwendig sal weet nie. As dit wat ek ervaar het met iemand anders gebeur het, met enigiemand anders, sou dit merkwaardig genoeg gewees het. Maar dat dit met my gebeur het … Die afleiding dat dit met ’n rede gebeur het, het my ongemaklik laat voel. Daar was genoeg van die ou dokter in my om te besef hoe vreemd – trouens, hoe grootdoenerig – dit klink. Maar toe ek die blote onwaarskynlikheid van al die besonderhede bymekaartel – en veral toe ek in ag neem hoe ideaal geskik ’n toestand soos *E. coli*-meningitis is om die korteks tot stilstand te bring, en hoe vinnig en volledig ek van byna totale verwoesting herstel het – móés ek net die moontlikheid ernstig oorweeg dat dit waarlik tog om ’n rede gebeur het.

Dit het my met ’n groter verantwoordelikheidsbesef gevul om my verhaal reg te vertel.

Ek was altyd daarop gesteld om op hoogte te bly van die jongste mediese literatuur op my gebied, en om ook by te dra as ek iets van waarde kon byvoeg. Dat ek hierdie wêreld verlaat en ’n ander een besoek het, was nuus – egte mediese nuus – en ek was van plan om reg daaraan te laat geskied. Medies gesproke was die feit dat ek volledig herstel het ’n saak van onmoontlikheid, ’n mediese wonderwerk. Maar die ware verhaal was eerder wat ek ondergaan het, en dit was my plig – nie net as ’n wetenskaplike en navolger van die wetenskaplike metode nie, maar ook as ’n geneser – om die verhaal te vertel. ’n Verhaal – ’n ware verhaal – kan ewe veel genees as medisyne. Susan het dit geweet toe sy my daardie dag op kantoor gebel het. En ek het dit self ervaar toe ek ’n antwoord van my biologiese familie ontvang het. Wat met my gebeur het, was ook genesende nuus. Watter soort geneser sou ek wees as ek dit nie sou deel nie?

Net meer as twee jaar nadat ek uit die koma gekom het, het ek ’n goeie vriend en kollega besoek wat die voorsitter is van een van die voorste neurowetenskapdepartemente in die wêreld. Ek ken John (nie sy regte naam nie) al tientalle jare en beskou hom as ’n wonderlike mens en eersterangse wetenskaplike.

Ek het John vertel van my geestelike reis terwyl ek in ’n diep koma was, en hy het my verbaas aangekyk. Nie verbaas oor hoe ver heen ek nou was nie, maar asof hy uiteindelik iets verstaan wat hom al lankal

pla.

Dit blyk toe dat sy pa ’n jaar vantevore die einde van die pad bereik het na ’n siekte van vyf jaar. Hy kon niks meer vir homself doen nie, sy gedagtes was nie meer helder nie en hy het erge pyn verduur. Hy wou net sterf en het John gesoebat om hom te help om ’n einde aan alles te maak.

Meteens het sy verstand helderder geraak as wat dit die voorafgaande twee jaar was en hy het ’n diep gesprek met John begin voer oor sy lewe en hulle gesin. Toe het hy na die voetenent van die bed gekyk, en begin praat asof daar iemand is. John het besef sy pa praat met sý ma wat oorlede is toe hy nog ’n tiener was. Hoewel hy selde met John oor haar gepraat het, was hy nou in ’n vrolike en lewendige gesprek met haar gewikkel. John kon haar nie sien nie, maar hy was heeltemal oortuig dat haar gees daar is, om sy pa se gees te verwelkom.

‘n Paar minute later het sy pa weer na hom gekyk, maar met ’n heel ander uitdrukking. John kon nie onthou dat hy hom al ooit so vreedsaam sien glimlag het nie.

Sonder om eers daaroor na te dink, het John gesê: “Slaap nou maar, Pa. Dis alles reg, Pa kan nou maar laat gaan.”

En dit is wat sy pa gedoen het. Hy het sy oë toegemaak en met ’n vredige uitdrukking op sy gesig ingesluimer. Kort daarna is hy oorlede.

Vir John was die ontmoeting tussen sy pa en sy oorlede ouma baie werklik, maar hy het nie geweet wat om daarvan te maak nie, want as ’n mediese dokter het hy geweet hierdie soort ding is “onmoontlik”. Daar is baie verhale van hierdie verbasende helderheid wat kort voor die dood intree by bejaardes wat al begin dement raak, soos wat John by sy pa gesien het – ’n verskynsel bekend as terminale helderheid. Daar is geen neurowetenskaplike verklaring daarvoor nie. Toe hy my verhaal hoor, het hy die lisensie gekry waarna hy so lank verlang het, die lisensie om te glo wat hy met sy eie oë gesien het – die diep en troostende wete dat ons geestelike self meer werklik is as enigiets wat ons in hierdie fisieke wêreld sal teëkom en dat daardie geestelike self ’n heilige verbintenis met die ewige liefde van die Skepper het.

32.

A Visit to Church

There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN (1879–1955)

I didn't make it back to church until December 2008, when Holley coaxed me out to services for the second Sunday of Advent. I was still weak, still a bit off balance, still underweight. Holley and I sat in the front row. Michael Sullivan was presiding over the service that day, and he came up and asked if I felt like lighting the second candle on the Advent wreath. I didn't want to, but something told me to do it anyhow. I stood up, put my hand on the brass pole, and strode to the front of the church with unexpected ease.

My memory of my time out of the body was still naked and raw, and everywhere I turned in this place that had failed to move me much before, I saw art and heard music that brought it all right back. The pulsing bass note of a hymn echoed the rough misery of the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View. The stained glass windows with their clouds and angels brought to mind the celestial beauty of the Gateway. A painting of Jesus breaking bread with his disciples evoked the communion of the Core. I shuddered as I recalled the bliss of infinite unconditional love I had known there.

At last, I understood what religion was really all about. Or at least was supposed to be about. I didn't just believe in God; I knew God. As I hobbled to the altar to take Communion, tears streamed down my cheeks.

32.

’n Kerkbesoek

There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is.

ALBERT EINSTEIN (1879-1955)

Ek het eers in Desember 2008 weer in die kerk gekom, toe Holley my sover kry om op tweede Adventsondag die diens by te woon. Ek is nog swak, nog ’n bietjie van balans, nog bietjie ondergewig. Ons sit in die voorste ry. Michael Sullivan behartig daardie dag die diens, en hy kom na my toe en vra of ek die tweede kers op die Adventkrans wil aansteek. Ek wil nie, maar iets sê vir my om dit tog te doen. Ek staan op, sit my hand op die reling en stap met verbasend min inspanning vorentoe.

My herinneringe van my tyd buite my liggaam is nog kaal en rou, en oral waar ek in die kerk kyk – hierdie plek wat my voorheen nie aangespreek het nie – sien ek kuns en hoor ek musiek wat alles weer laat herleef. Die polsende basnote van die gesang laat die Ryk van die Erdwurmperspektief weerklink. Die loodglasvensters met die wolke en engele herinner my aan die hemelse skoonheid van die Poort. ’n Skildery van Jesus wat saam met sy dissipels Nagmaal geniet, roep die heilige gemeenskap van die Kern op. ’n Rilling gaan deur my toe ek die oneindige onvoorwaardelike liefde wat ek daar geken het, weer besef.

Uiteindelik verstaan ek wat geloof werklik beteken. Of wat dit veronderstel is om te beteken. Ek het nie net in God geglo nie; ek het God geken. Toe ek later na die altaar toe skuifel om Nagmaal te gebruik, het trane by my wange afgerol.

33.

The Enigma of Consciousness

If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.

—RENÉ DESCARTES (1596–1650)

It took about two months for my full battery of neurosurgical knowledge to come back to me. Leaving aside for the moment the essentially miraculous fact that it *did* come back (there continues to be no medical precedent for my case, in which a brain under long-term attack of such a severe degree by gram-negative bacteria like *E. coli* recovers anything like its full abilities), once it had, I continued to wrestle with the fact that everything I had learned in four decades of study and work about the human brain, about the universe, and about what constitutes reality conflicted with what I'd experienced during those seven days in coma. When I fell into my coma, I was a secular doctor who had spent his entire career in some of the most prestigious research institutions in the world, trying to understand the connections between the human brain and consciousness. It wasn't that I didn't believe in consciousness. I was simply more aware than most people of the staggering mechanical unlikelihood that it existed independently—at all!

In the 1920s, the physicist Werner Heisenberg (and other founders of the science of quantum mechanics) made a discovery so strange that the world has yet to completely come to terms with it. When observing subatomic phenomena, it is impossible to completely separate the observer (that is, the scientist making the experiment) from what is being observed. In our day-to-day world, it is easy to miss this fact. We see the universe as a place full of separate objects (tables and chairs, people and planets) that occasionally interact with each other, but that nonetheless remain essentially separate. On the subatomic level, however, this universe of separate objects turns out to be a complete illusion. In the realm of the super-super-small, every object in the physical universe is intimately connected with every

other object. In fact, there are really no "objects" in the world at all, only vibrations of energy, and relationships.

What that meant should have been obvious, though it wasn't to many. It was impossible to pursue the core reality of the universe without using consciousness. Far from being an unimportant by-product of physical processes (as I had thought before my experience), consciousness is not only very real—it's actually *more real* than the rest of physical existence, and most likely the basis of it all. But neither of these insights has yet been truly incorporated into science's picture of reality. Many scientists are trying to do so, but as of yet there is no unified "theory of everything" that can combine the laws of quantum mechanics with those of relativity theory in a way that begins to incorporate consciousness.

All the objects in the physical universe are made up of atoms. Atoms, in turn, are made up of protons, electrons, and neutrons. These, in turn, are (as physicists also discovered in the early years of the twentieth century) all particles. And particles are made up of . . . Well, quite frankly, physicists don't really know. But one thing we do know about particles is that each one is connected to every other one in the universe. They are all, at the deepest level, interconnected.

Before my experience out beyond, I was generally aware of all these modern scientific ideas, but they were distant and remote. In the world I lived and moved in—the world of cars and houses and operating tables and patients who did well or not depending partially on whether I operated on them successfully—these facts of subatomic physics were rarefied and removed. They might be true, but they didn't concern my daily reality.

But when I left my physical body behind, I experienced these facts directly. In fact, I feel confident in saying that, while I didn't even know the term at the time, while in the Gateway and in the Core, I was actually "doing science." Science that relied on the truest and most sophisticated tool for scientific research that we possess:

Consciousness itself.

The further I dug, the more convinced I became that my discovery wasn't just interesting or dramatic. It was *scientific*. Depending on whom you talk to, consciousness is either the greatest mystery facing scientific enquiry, or a total nonproblem. What's surprising is just how many more scientists think it's the latter. For many—maybe most—scientists, consciousness isn't really worth worrying about because it is just a by-product of physical processes. Many scientists go further,

saying that not only is consciousness a secondary phenomenon, but that in addition, it's not even *real.*

Many leaders in the neuroscience of consciousness and the philosophy of mind, however, would beg to differ. Over the last few decades, they have come to recognize the "hard problem of consciousness." Although the idea had been coalescing for decades, it was David Chalmers who defined it in his brilliant 1996 book, *The Conscious Mind*. The hard problem concerns the very existence of conscious experience and can be distilled into these questions:

How does consciousness arise out of the functioning of the human brain?

How is it related to the behavior that it accompanies?

How does the perceived world relate to the real world?

The hard problem is so hard to resolve that some thinkers have said the answer lies outside of "science" altogether. But that it lies outside the bounds of current science in no way belittles the phenomenon of consciousness—in fact, it is a clue as to its unfathomably profound role in the universe.

The ascendance of the scientific method based solely in the physical realm over the past four hundred years presents a major problem: we have lost touch with the deep mystery at the center of existence—our consciousness. It was (under different names and expressed through different world-views) something known well and held close by pre-modern religions, but it was lost to our secular Western culture as we became increasingly enamored with the power of modern science and technology.

For all of the successes of Western civilization, the world has paid a dear price in terms of the most crucial component of existence—our human spirit. The shadow side of high technology—modern warfare and thoughtless homicide and suicide, urban blight, ecological mayhem, cataclysmic climate change, polarization of economic resources—is bad enough. Much worse, our focus on exponential progress in science and technology has left many of us relatively bereft in the realm of meaning and joy, and of knowing how our lives fit into the grand scheme of existence for all eternity.

Questions concerning the soul and afterlife, reincarnation, God, and Heaven proved difficult to answer through conventional scientific means, which implied that they might not exist. Likewise, extended consciousness phenomena, such as remote viewing, extrasensory perception, psychokinesis, clairvoyance, telepathy, and precognition,

have seemed stubbornly resistant to comprehend through "standard" scientific investigations. Before my coma, I doubted their veracity, mainly because I had never experienced them at a deep level, and because they could not be readily explained by my simplistic scientific view of the world.

Like many other scientific skeptics, I refused to even review the data relevant to the questions concerning these phenomena. I prejudged the data, and those providing it, because my limited perspective failed to provide the foggiest notion of how such things might actually happen. Those who assert that there is no evidence for phenomena indicative of extended consciousness, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, are willfully ignorant. They believe they know the truth without needing to look at the facts.

For those still stuck in the trap of scientific skepticism, I recommend the book *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century,* published in 2007. The evidence for out-of-body consciousness is well presented in this rigorous scientific analysis. *Irreducible Mind* is a landmark opus from a highly reputable group, the Division of Perceptual Studies, based at the University of Virginia. The authors provide an exhaustive review of the relevant data, and the conclusion is inescapable: these phenomena are real, and we must try to understand their nature if we want to comprehend the reality of our existence.

We have been seduced into thinking that the scientific world view is fast approaching a Theory of Everything (or TOE), which would not seem to leave much room for our soul, or spirit, or for Heaven, and God. My journey deep into coma, outside of this lowly physical realm and into the loftiest dwelling place of the almighty Creator, revealed the indescribably immense chasm between our human knowledge and the awe-inspiring realm of God.

Each one of us is more familiar with consciousness than we are with anything else, and yet we understand far more about the rest of the universe than we do about the mechanism of consciousness. It is *so* close to home that it is almost forever beyond our grasp. There is nothing about the physics of the material world (quarks, electrons, photons, atoms, etc.), and specifically the intricate structure of the brain, that gives the slightest clue as to the mechanism of consciousness.

In fact, the greatest clue to the reality of the spiritual realm is this *profound mystery* of our conscious existence. This is a far more

mysterious revelation than physicists or neuroscientists have shown themselves capable of dealing with, and their failure to do so has left the intimate relationship between consciousness and quantum mechanics—and thus physical reality—obscured.

To truly study the universe on a deep level, we must acknowledge the fundamental role of consciousness in painting reality. Experiments in quantum mechanics shocked those brilliant fathers of the field, many of whom (Werner Heisenberg, Wolfgang Pauli, Niels Bohr, Erwin Schrödinger, Sir James Jeans, to name a few) turned to the mystical worldview seeking answers. They realized it was impossible to separate the experimenter from the experiment, and to explain reality without consciousness. What I discovered out beyond is the indescribable immensity and complexity of the universe, and that *consciousness* is the basis of all that exists. I was so totally connected to it that there was often no real differentiation between "me" and the world I was moving through. If I had to summarize all this, I would say first, that the universe is much larger than it appears to be if we only look at its immediately visible parts. (This isn't much of a revolutionary insight actually, as conventional science acknowledges that 96 percent of the universe is made up of "dark matter and energy." What are these dark entities?[1] No one yet knows. But what made my experience unusual was the jolting immediacy with which I experienced the basic role of consciousness, or spirit. It wasn't theory when I learned this up there, but a fact, overwhelming and immediate as a blast of arctic air in the face.) Second: We—each of us—are intricately, irremovably connected to the larger universe. It is our true home, and thinking that this physical world is all that matters is like shutting oneself up in a small closet and imagining that there is nothing else out beyond it. And third: the crucial power of *belief* in facilitating "mind-over-matter." I was often bemused as a medical student over the confounding power of the placebo effect—that medical studies had to overcome the 30 percent or so benefit that was attributed to a patient's believing that he was receiving medicine that would help him, even if it was simply an inert substance. Instead of seeing the underlying power of belief, and how it influenced our health, the medical profession saw the glass as "half-empty"—that the placebo effect was an obstacle to the demonstration of a treatment.

At the heart of the enigma of quantum mechanics lies the falsehood of our notion of locality in space and time. The rest of the universe—that is, the vast majority of it—isn't actually distant from us in space.

Yes, physical space seems real, but it is limited as well. The entire length and height of the physical universe is as nothing to the spiritual realm from which it has risen—the realm of consciousness (which some might refer to as "the life force").

This other, vastly grander universe isn't "far away" at all. In fact, it's right here—right here where I am, typing this sentence, and right there where you are, reading it. It's not far away physically, but simply exists on a different frequency. It's right here, right now, but we're unaware of it because we are for the most part closed to those frequencies on which it manifests. We live in the dimensions of familiar space and time, hemmed in by the peculiar limitations of our sensory organs and by our perceptual scaling within the spectrum from subatomic quantum up through the entire universe. Those dimensions, while they have many things going for them, also shut us out from the other dimensions that exist as well.

The ancient Greeks discovered all of this long ago, and I was only discovering for myself what they'd already hit upon: Like understands like. The universe is so constructed that to truly understand any part of its many dimensions and levels, *you have to become a part of that dimension*. Or, stated a little more accurately, you have to open yourself to an identity with that part of the universe that you already possess, but which you may not have been conscious of.

The universe has no beginning or end, and God is entirely present within every particle of it. Much—in fact, most—of what people have had to say about God and the higher spiritual worlds has involved bringing them down to our level, rather than elevating our perceptions up to theirs. We taint, with our insufficient descriptions, their truly awesome nature.

But though it never began and will never end, the universe does have punctuation marks, the purpose of which is to bring beings into existence and allow them to participate in the glory of God. The Big Bang that created our universe was one of these creative "punctuation marks." Om's view was from outside, encompassing all of Om's Creation and beyond even my higher-dimensional field of view. Here, to see was to know. There was no distinction between experiencing something and my understanding it.

"I was blind, but now I see," now took on a new meaning as I understood just how blind to the full nature of the spiritual universe we are on earth—especially people like I had been, who had believed that matter was the core reality, and that all else—thought,

consciousness, ideas, emotions, spirit—were simply productions of it.

This revelation inspired me greatly, because it allowed me to see the staggering heights of communion and understanding that lie ahead for us all, when each of us leaves the limitations of our physical body and brain behind.

Humor. Irony. Pathos. I had always thought these were qualities we humans developed to cope with this so often painful and unfair world. And they are. But in addition to being consolations, these qualities are *recognitions*—brief, flashing, but all-important—of the fact that whatever our struggles and sufferings in the present world are, they can't truly touch the larger, eternal beings we in truth are. Laughter and irony are at heart reminders that we are not prisoners in this world, but voyagers through it.

Another aspect of the good news is that you don't have to almost die to glimpse behind the veil—but you must do the work. Learning about that realm from books and presentations is a start—but at the end of the day, we each have to go deep into our own consciousness, through prayer or meditation, to access these truths.

Meditation comes in many different forms. The most useful for me since my coma has been that developed by Robert A. Monroe, founder of the Monroe Institute in Faber, Virginia. Their freedom from any dogmatic philosophy offers a distinct advantage. The only dogma associated with Monroe's system of meditative exercises is: *I am more than my physical body.* This simple acknowledgment has profound implications.

Robert Monroe was a successful radio program producer in the 1950s in New York. In the process of investigating the use of audio recordings as a sleep-learning technique, he began to have out-of-body experiences. His detailed research over more than four decades has resulted in a powerful system to enhance deep conscious exploration based on an audio technology he developed known as "Hemi-Sync."

Hemi-Sync can heighten selective awareness and performance through creation of a relaxed state. Hemi-Sync offers much more than this, however—enhanced states of consciousness allow access to alternate perceptual modes, including deep meditation and mystical states. Hemi-Sync involves the physics of resonant entrainment of brain waves, their relationship to the perceptual and behavioral psychology of consciousness, and to the fundamental physiology of the brain-mind and consciousness.

Hemi-Sync uses specific patterns of stereo sound waves (of slightly

different frequencies in each ear) to induce synchronized brain wave activity. These “binaural beats” are generated at a frequency that is the arithmetic difference between the two signal frequencies. By using an ancient but highly accurate timing system in the brainstem that normally enables localization of sound sources in the horizontal plane around the head, these binaural beats can entrain the adjacent Reticular Activating System, which provides steady timing signals to the thalamus and cortex enabling consciousness. These signals generate brain wave synchrony in the range of 1 to 25 hertz (Hz, or cycles per second), including the crucial region below the normal threshold for human hearing (20 Hz). This lowest range is associated with brain waves in the delta (< 4 Hz, normally found in deep dreamless sleep), theta (4 to 7 Hz, seen in deep meditation and relaxation, and in non-REM sleep), and alpha ranges (7 to 13 Hz, characteristic of REM or dream sleep, drowsiness at the borders of sleep, and awakened relaxation).

In my journey of understanding after my coma, Hemi-Sync potentially offered a means of inactivating the filtering function of the physical brain by globally synchronizing my neocortical electrical activity, just as my meningitis might have done, to liberate my out-of-body consciousness. I believe Hemi-Sync has enabled me to return to a realm similar to that which I visited deep in coma, but without having to be deathly ill. But just as in my dreams of flying as a child, this is very much a process of *allowing* the journey to unfold—if I try to force it, to over-*think* it, or embrace the process too much, it doesn’t work.

To use the word *all-knowing* feels inappropriate, because the awe and creative power I witnessed was beyond naming. I realized that the proscriptions of some religions against naming God or depicting divine prophets did indeed have an intuitive correctness to them, because God’s reality is in truth so completely beyond any of our human attempts at capturing God in words or pictures while here on earth.

Just as my awareness was both individual yet at the same time completely unified with the universe, so also did the boundaries of what I experienced as my “self” at times contract, and at other times expand to include all that exists throughout eternity. The blurring of the boundary between my awareness and the realm around me went so far at times that I *became* the entire universe. Another way of putting this would be to say that I momentarily saw an identity with the universe, which had been there all the time, but that I had just been blind to up till then.

An analogy I often use to demonstrate my consciousness at that deepest level is that of a hen's egg. While in the Core, even when I became one with the Orb of light and the entire higher-dimensional universe throughout all eternity, and was intimately one with God, I sensed strongly that the creative, primordial (prime mover) aspect of God was the shell around the egg's contents, intimately associated throughout (as our consciousness is a direct extension of the Divine), yet forever beyond the capability of absolute identification with the consciousness of the created. Even as my consciousness became identical with all and eternity, I sensed that I could not become entirely one with the creative, originating driver of all that is. At the heart of the most infinite oneness, there was still that duality. It is possible that such apparent duality is simply the result of trying to bring such awareness back into this realm.

I never heard Om's voice directly, nor saw Om's face. It was as if Om spoke to me through thoughts that were like wave-walls rolling through me, rocking everything around me and showing that there is a deeper fabric of existence—a fabric that all of us are always part of, but which we're generally not conscious of.

So I was communicating directly with God? Absolutely. Expressed that way, it sounds grandiose. But when it was happening, it didn't feel that way. Instead, I felt like I was doing what every soul is able to do when they leave their bodies, and what we can all do right now through various methods of prayer or deep meditation. Communicating with God is the most extraordinary experience imaginable, yet at the same time it's the most natural one of all, because God is present in us at all times. Omniscient, omnipotent, personal—and loving us without conditions. We are connected as One through our divine link with God.

33.

Die Enigma van Bewussyn

If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.
RENÉ DESCARTES (1596-1650)

Dit duur sowat twee maande voordat my volle arsenaal neurochirurgiese kennis weer paraat is. Die feit dat dit wel teruggekom het, is op sigself ’n wonderwerk. Daar is nog steeds geen mediese presedent vir my geval nie, waar ’n pasiënt wie se brein so lank so ’n ernstige aanval van ’n Gram-negatiewe bakterie soos *E. coli* deurstaan het en weer ten volle herstel het. Na my herstel moet ek egter die feit konfronteer dat alles wat ek in die loop van veertig jaar se studie en werk oor die mens se brein geleer het, in stryd is met wat ek gedurende die sewe dae in koma ervaar het. Toe ek in die koma verval het, was ek ’n niegodsdienstige dokter wat sy hele loopbaan in van die mees vooraanstaande navorsingsinrigtings in die wêreld deurgebring het, en ’n studie gemaak het van die skakels tussen die mens se brein en die menslike bewussyn. Dit was nie asof ek nie in die bewussyn geglo het nie. Ek was net meer as die meeste mense bewus van hoe onwaarskynlik dit is dat die bewussyn onafhanklik van die brein bestaan.

In die 1920’s het die fisikus Werner Heisenberg en ander grondleggers van kwantummeganika as wetenskap ’n ontdekking gedoen wat so vreemd was dat die wêreld dit nou nog nie heeltemal verwerk het nie. Wanneer subatomiese verskynsels waargeneem word, is dit onmoontlik om die waarnemer (dit wil sê die wetenskaplike wat die eksperiment uitvoer) heeltemal te skei van dit wat waargeneem word. In ons alledaagse werklikheid is dit maklik om hierdie feit uit die oog te verloor. Ons sien die heelal as ’n plek vol afsonderlike voorwerpe (tafels en stoele, mense en planete) wat soms met mekaar skakel, maar wat nogtans in wese afsonderlik is. Op die subatomiese vlak blyk dat hierdie heelal van afsonderlike voorwerpe ’n illusie is. Op die super-super-klein vlak staan elke voorwerp in die fisiese heelal

in verhouding tot elke ander voorwerp. Trouens, daar is geen "voorwerpe" in die wêreld nie, net energievibrasies en verhoudings.

Die betekenis hiervan behoort vanselfsprekend te wees, maar vir baie is dit nie. Dit is onmoontlik om die kernwerklikheid van die heelal te ondersoek sonder om die bewussyn te gebruik. Die bewussyn is allesbehalwe 'n onbelangrike neweproduk van fisiese prosesse (soos ek voor my ervaring gedink het), dit is nie net uiters werklik nie – dit is *meer werklik* as die res van die fisiese bestaan en heel waarskynlik die basis van alles. Nie een van hierdie insigte is egter al in die wetenskap se beeld van die werklikheid geïntegreer nie. Baie wetenskaplikes probeer om dit te doen, maar tot dusver is daar nog geen geïntegreerde "teorie van alles" wat die wette van kwantummeganika met dié van die relatiwiteitsteorie op 'n manier kan kombineer wat die bewussyn begin insluit nie.

Al die voorwerpe in die heelal bestaan uit atome. Atome bestaan weer uit protone, elektrone en neutrone. Hierdie deeltjies bestaan weer alles uit partikels (soos fisici ook aan die begin van die twintigste eeu ontdek het). En partikels bestaan uit … nou ja, om die waarheid te sê, fisici weet nie eintlik nie. Maar een ding wat ons wel van partikels weet, is dat elkeen verbind is aan elke ander een in die heelal. Op die mees basiese vlak is alle partikels met mekaar verbind.

Voor my ervaring buite my liggaam was ek vaagweg bewus van al hierdie nuwe wetenskaplike idees, maar dit was ver verwyder van my bestaan. Die beginsels van subatomiese fisika was ver verhewe bo die wêreld waarin ek my lewe gelei het – die wêreld van motors en huise en operasietafels en pasiënte wat vorder of nie, na gelang van hoe suksesvol die operasies is wat ek uitvoer. Dit was miskien alles waar, maar dit het nie 'n invloed op my daaglikse werklikheid gehad nie.

Maar toe ek my liggaam verlaat, het ek hierdie feite eerstehands ervaar. Trouens, ek kan met vertroue sê dat terwyl ek in die Poort en die Kern was, ek nie eens van die term bewus was nie, maar dat ek inderwaarheid besig was om wetenskap te beoefen. Wetenskap wat op die mees betroubare en gevorderde hulpmiddel vir wetenskaplike navorsing berus:

Die bewussyn self.

Hoe dieper ek gedelf het, hoe meer oortuig was ek dat my ontdekking nie net interessant of dramaties was nie. Dit was

wetenskaplik. Bewussyn is óf die grootste geheimenis waarteen wetenskaplike ondersoek te staan kom óf dit is geheel en al onproblematies – dit hang net af van wie jy vra. Dit is egter verbasend dat veel meer wetenskaplikes laasgenoemde standpunt huldig. Vir baie – miskien die meeste – wetenskaplikes is bewussyn nie iets wat hulle interesseer nie, want dit is tog net 'n neweproduk van fisiese prosesse. Baie wetenskaplikes gaan nog verder deur te sê dat bewussyn nie net 'n sekondêre verskynsel is nie, maar dat dit nie eens werklik bestaan nie.

Baie leiers in die neurowetenskap van bewussyn en die filosofie van die siel en gees sou egter hiervan verskil. In die afgelope dekades het hulle begin bewus raak van die "moeilike probleem van bewussyn". Hoewel die idee al lank begin vorm aanneem het, was dit David Chalmers wat dit in 1996 in sy briljante boek *The Conscious Mind* omskryf het. Die moeilike probleem hou verband met die ware bestaan van bewuste ervaring en kan met die volgende drie vrae opgesom word:

Hoe ontstaan bewussyn uit die funksionering van die mens se brein?

Hoe hou dit verband met die gedrag wat daarmee saamgaan?

Wat is die verhouding tussen die waargenome wêreld en die werklike of reële wêreld?

Die moeilike probleem is so moeilik om op te los dat sommige denkers van mening is dat die antwoord buite die grense van die wetenskap lê. Dat dit buite die grense van hedendaagse wetenskap lê, doen geensins afbreuk aan die verskynsel van bewussyn nie – trouens, dit is juis 'n leidraad tot die onmeetbaar groot rol wat dit in die heelal speel.

Die opkoms gedurende die afgelope vierhonderd jaar van die wetenskaplike metode wat slegs in die fisiese wêreld gesetel is, veroorsaak 'n groot probleem: Ons het voeling verloor met die diep geheimenis in die kern van ons bestaan – ons bewussyn. Dit is iets wat in premoderne godsdiens goed bekend was en na waarde geskat is, al het dit verskillende name in verskillende wêreldbeskouings gehad, maar in ons sekulêre Westerse kultuur het dit verlore geraak namate ons behep geraak het met die mag van moderne wetenskap en tegnologie.

Ondanks al die suksesse van die Westerse beskawing het die wêreld

’n duur prys betaal ten opsigte van die mees kritieke komponent van ons bestaan – die menslike gees. Die skadukant van gevorderde tegnologie – moderne oorlogvoering en onbesonne moord en selfmoord, stedelike verval, ekologiese wanorde, rampspoedige klimaatsverandering, polarisasie van ekonomiese hulpbronne – is al erg genoeg. Wat nog veel erger is, is dat ons ingesteldheid op die eksponensiële vooruitgang van wetenskap en tegnologie baie van ons sonder betekenis en vreugde in ons lewe gelaat het, en sonder dat ons begrip het vir hoe ons lewe in die groot skema van bestaan in die ewigheid inpas.

Vrae oor die siel en die hiernamaals, reïnkarnasie, God en die hemel is moeilik om met behulp van konvensionele wetenskaplike metodes te beantwoord, waaruit ons sou kon aflei dat hierdie dinge nie bestaan nie. Verskynsels wat uitgebreide bewussyn behels, soos afstandwaarneming, buitesintuiglike waarneming, psigokinese, heldersiendheid, telepatie en voorkennis was tot dusver moeilik om met behulp van algemeen aanvaarde wetenskaplike ondersoeke begryp te word. Voor my koma het ek die geldigheid van sulke verskynsels betwyfel, hoofsaaklik omdat ek dit nooit self ervaar het nie en omdat dit nie geredelik met behulp van my simplistiese wetenskaplike wêreldbeskouing verklaar kon word nie.

Soos baie ander wetenskaplike skeptici het ek selfs geweier om die data te oorweeg wat met hierdie verskynsels verband hou. Ek het dit by voorbaat verwerp, asook diegene wat dit verskaf het, omdat my beperkte siening geen ruimte gelaat het om selfs eens te oorweeg dat hierdie dinge kon moontlik wees nie. Mense wat volhou dat daar geen bewyse is vir verskynsels wat op uitgebreide bewussyn dui nie, ondanks oorweldigende bewyse, is doelbewus en wetend oningelig. Hulle glo dat hulle die waarheid ken sonder dat hulle van die feite kennis neem.

Vir diegene wat nog steeds in wetenskaplike skeptisisme vasgeval is, beveel ek die boek *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* aan, uitgegee in 2007. Die bewyse vir buiteliggaamlike ervarings word in hierdie deeglike wetenskaplike ontleding goed uiteengesit. Die boek verteenwoordig ’n mylpaal op hierdie gebied en is die produk van ’n hoogaangeskrewe werkgroep, die Division of Perceptual Studies, aan die Universiteit van Virginië. Die outeurs

verskaf ’n volledige oorsig van die toepaslike data, en die gevolgtrekking is onweerlegbaar: Hierdie verskynsels is werklik, en ons moet die aard daarvan probeer verstaan as ons die werklikheid van ons bestaan beter wil begryp.

Ons is wysgemaak dat die wetenskap binnekort ’n Teorie van Alles (TVA of unifikasieteorie) sal ontwikkel, wat nie veel ruimte sal laat vir die siel, of gees, of die hemel en God nie. My reis tydens my koma, buite die nederige fisiese wêreld na die hoogste woonplek van die almagtige Skepper, het die onbeskryflik groot gaping tussen ons menslike kennis en die ontsagwekkende wêreld van God blootgelê.

Elkeen van ons is meer bekend met bewussyn as met enigiets anders, en tog verstaan ons veel meer van die res van die heelal as van die werking van bewussyn. Dit is *so* na aan ons dat dit bykans buite ons bereik is. Daar is niks in die fisika van die stoflike wêreld (kwarke, elektrone, fotone, atome ens.), en meer spesifiek in die ingewikkelde struktuur van die brein, wat oor ons naastenby ’n leidraad gee oor die werking van die bewussyn nie.

Trouens, die grootste leidraad vir die werklikheid van die geestelike wêreld is juis die *groot geheimenis* van ons bewuste bestaan. Dit is ’n ver groter misterie as wat fisici of neurowetenskaplikes tot dusver kon peil, en hul onvermoë om dit te doen het die intieme verhouding tussen bewussyn en kwantummeganika – en dus fisiese werklikheid – verberg.

Om waarlik die heelal in diepte te bestudeer moet ons kennis neem van die fundamentele rol van die bewussyn om die werklikheid daar te stel. Die resultate van eksperimente in kwantummeganika was vir die baanbrekers op die gebied ’n openbaring. Baie het hulle na die mistieke gewend op soek na antwoorde – Werner Heisenberg, Wolfgang Pauli, Niels Bohr, Erwin Schrödinger, sir James Jeans, om maar ’n paar te noem. Hulle het besef dat dit onmoontlik is om die uitvoerder van die eksperiment van die uitvoering van die eksperiment te skei, en om die werklikheid sonder bewussyn te beskryf. Wat ek buite my liggaam ontdek het, is dat *bewussyn* die basis is van alles wat bestaan. Ek was so verbonde daaraan dat daar dikwels geen werklike onderskeid was tussen “my” en die wêreld waardeur ek beweeg het nie.

As ek die rol van bewussyn moes opsom, sou ek ten eerste sê dat die

heelal veel groter is as wat dit lyk, indien ons slegs na die onmiddellik sigbare dele kyk. Hierdie insig is in werklikheid nie so vernuwend nie, want volgens die aanvaarde wetenskaplike kennis bestaan 96% van die heelal uit “donker materie en energie”. Wat is hierdie donker entiteite? Niemand weet nog nie. Maar wat besonders is omtrent my ervaring was die treffende onmiddellikheid waarmee ek die basiese rol van bewussyn of gees ervaar het. Dit was geen teorie wat ek daar geleer het nie, maar ’n feit, oorweldigend en onmiddellik, soos ’n vlaag yskoue lug van voor. Ten tweede: Ons – elkeen van ons – is onlosmaaklik, onomkeerbaar verbonde aan die groter heelal. Dit is ons ware tuiste, en om te dink dat die fisiese wêreld al is wat saak maak, is soos om in ’n klein hokkie in te kruip en te maak asof daar niks daarbuite is nie. Die derde oorweging is die kritieke mag van *geloof* om fisiese struikelblokke te oorkom. As mediese student was ek dikwels verbaas dat die plasebo-effek so ’n groot rol in farmaseutiese ondersoeke speel: Pasiënte in die kontrolegroep wat ’n plasebo ontvang, toon in die algemeen ’n voordeel van sowat 30%. Dit word toegeskryf aan die feit dat dié pasiënte glo hulle ontvang ’n middel wat hulle toestand sal verbeter, al is dit ’n onaktiewe stof. Wetenskaplikes beskou die plasebo-effek as ’n struikelblok om ’n geneesmiddel se effektiwiteit aan te toon, terwyl hulle dit eerder moet sien as ’n bewys van die mag van geloof en hoe dit ons gesondheid raak.

Sewentig persent is “donker energie”, die geheimsinnige krag wat sterrekundiges in die 1990’s ontdek het, toe hulle onweerlegbare bewyse gevind het, gebaseer op Tipe Ia supernovas, dat die heelal die afgelope 5 miljard jaar reeds opwaarts val – dat die uitbreiding van alle ruimte versnel. Nog 26 persent is “donker materie”, die anomale “oormaat” swaartekrag wat die afgelope dekades in die rotasie van die sterrestelsels en galaktiese sterswerms waargeneem is. Daar sal verklaring kom, maar die geheimenisse oorkant sal nooit ophou nie.

Onderliggend aan die enigma van kwantummeganika is die wanopvatting dat ons in ruimte en tyd geleë is. Die res van die heelal – altans, die grootste deel daarvan – is nie ver van ons verwyder nie. Fisiese ruimte lyk werklik, maar dit is ook beperk. Die hele lengte en breedte van die fisiese heelal is niks in vergelyking met die geestelike wêreld waaruit dit ontstaan het nie – die universele bewussyn.

Hierdie ander, veel grootser heelal is glad nie ver weg nie. Trouens, dit is sommer net hier – hier waar ek is, besig om hierdie sin te tik, en daar waar jy dit lees. Dit is nie fisies ver verwyderd nie, maar bestaan bloot op ’n ander golflengte. Dit is hier, en nou, maar ons is onbewus daarvan omdat ons meesal nie ontvanklik is vir die golflengtes waar dit manifesteer nie. Ons lewe in die bekende dimensies van tyd en ruimte, en word ingeperk deur die vermoëns van ons sintuie en deur ons waarnemingskaal, wat strek van die subatomiese kwantum tot die uiteindes van die heelal. Hierdie dimensies sluit baie dinge in, maar sluit ook die ander dimensies uit.

Die ou Grieke het dit alles reeds lank gelede ontdek, en ek het maar net self agtergekom wat hulle reeds geweet het: Soort verstaan soort. Om enige deel van die vele dimensies en vlakke van die heelal waarlik te verstaan, moet jy deel word van daardie dimensie. Of, anders gestel, jy moet oop wees vir ’n verbintenis met daardie deel van die heelal wat jy reeds besit, maar waarvan jy moontlik nog nie bewus was nie.

Die heelal het geen begin en geen einde nie, en God is volkome teenwoordig in elke partikel daarvan. Heelwat – eintlik die meeste – van wat mense oor God en die hoër geestelike bestaan sê, kom daarop neer dat dit na ons vlak afgebring word, eerder as om ons begrip na die Goddelike vlak te verhef. Met ons onvolmaakte beskrywings tas ons die ontsagwekkende grootsheid daarvan aan.

Hoewel die heelal geen begin en geen einde het nie, is daar tog onderbrekings, met die doel om wesens te laat ontstaan wat in die wonder en glorie van God kan deel. Die oerknal wat ons heelal voortgebring het, was so ’n gebeurtenis. Om se perspektief is van buite, omvat Om se hele skepping en strek selfs verder as wat ek in die hoër dimensie kon waarneem. Om te sien, was om te weet, daar waar ek was. Daar was geen onderskeid tussen om iets te ervaar en om dit te verstaan nie.

“I … was blind, but now I see.” Hierdie woorde het vir my nuwe betekenis gekry, toe ek verstaan het hoe blind ons op aarde is vir die volle omvang van die geestelike heelal – veral mense soos wat ek eers was, wat glo dat die stoflike die kern van die werklikheid is en dat die res – denke, bewussyn, idees, emosies, gees – net daaruit voortspruit.

Hierdie openbaring was vir my ’n groot inspirasie, omdat dit my in

staat gestel het om die onpeilbare hoogtes te sien van geestelike gemeenskap en begrip wat vir elkeen van ons voorlê wanneer ons die beperkings van ons liggaam en brein agterlaat.

Humor. Ironie. Patos. Ek het altyd gedink dat die mens hierdie eienskappe ontwikkel het as ’n teenvoeter vir die pynlike en onregverdige wêreld. En dit is ook so. Maar hierdie eienskappe bied nie net vir ons ’n vertroosting nie, dit is ook herkenning – ’n kortstondige maar lewensbelangrike flits van herkenning – van die feit dat ons stryd en lyding op aarde nie die groter, ewige wesens wat ons in werklikheid is, kan aantas nie. Humor en ironie herinner ons daaraan dat ons nie gevangenes in hierdie wêreld is nie, maar reisigers daardeur.

’n Verdere aspek van die goeie nuus is dat ’n mens nie eers hoef te sterf om iets van die hiernamaals te kan sien nie – maar dan moet jy bereid wees om daaraan te werk. Jy kan meer leer oor die geestelike wêreld deur daaroor te lees en na ander te luister – maar op die ou einde moet elkeen sy eie bewussyn ondersoek, deur gebed en meditasie, om hierdie waarhede te vind.

Meditasie neem verskillende vorme aan. Sedert my koma het ek baie waarde geput uit die meditasietegniek wat deur Robert A. Monroe ontwikkel is, stigter van die Monroe Institute in Faber, Virginië. ’n Groot voordeel is dat dit nie aan enige dogmatiese wêreldbeskouing verbonde is nie. Monroe se meditasieoefeninge berus slegs op een beginsel: Ek is meer as my stoflike liggaam. Hierdie eenvoudige erkenning het diepgaande implikasies.

Robert Monroe was in die 1950’s ’n suksesvolle radio-aanbieder in New York. Terwyl hy die gebruik van klankopnames vir slaapinduksie ondersoek het, het hy begin om buiteliggaamlike ervarings te kry. In sy navorsing oor meer as veertig jaar het hy ’n stelsel ontwikkel wat die ondersoek van die diep bewussyn bevorder, met behulp van klanktegnologie bekend as Hemi-Sync.

Hemi-Sync kan selektiewe bewustheid en prestasie verhoog deur ’n ontspanne toestand te skep. Dit bied egter veel meer as dit. Verhoogde bewussyn verleen toegang tot alternatiewe waarnemingswyses, byvoorbeeld diep meditasie en mistiese toestande. Hemi-Sync is gebaseer op die fisika van resonante meevoering van breingolwe en die uitwerking daarvan op die waarnemings- en gedragsielkunde van

bewussyn, en op die fundamentele fisiologie van die brein en bewussyn.

Hemi-Sync benut bepaalde patrone wat stereo-klankgolwe vertoon (van effens verskillende frekwensies in elke oor) om gesinchroniseerde breinaktiwiteit aan te wakker. Hierdie binourale maatslae word gegenereer teen 'n frekwensie wat gelyk is aan die rekenkundige verskil tussen die twee seinfrekwensies. Deur 'n primitiewe maar hoogs akkurate tydreëlingsisteem in die breinstam te gebruik, wat normaalweg die lokalisering van klankbronne in die horisontale vlak om die kop moontlik maak, kan hierdie binourale maatslae die naasliggende retikulêre aktiveringstelsel meevoer, wat reëlmatige seine na die talamus en korteks stuur en sodoende bewussyn moontlik maak. Hierdie seine genereer breingolf-sinchronisme in die bestek van 1 tot 25 hertz (Hz, of siklusse per sekonde), wat die kritieke gebied onder die normale drempel vir die mens se gehoor insluit, naamlik 20 Hz. Hierdie laagste gebied word met die volgende breingolfreikwydtes geassosieer: delta, <4 Hz, normaalweg in diep, droomlose slaap; theta, 4 tot 7 Hz, in diep meditasie en 'n diep ontspanne toestand, en in nie-REM-slaap; en alfa, 7 tot 13 Hz, in REM-slaap, of droom-slaap, vaakheid net voor insluimer, en wakker ontspanne toestand.

In my reis na dieper begrip ná my koma het Hemi-Sync die moontlikheid gebied om die filtreringsfunksie van die fisiese brein te deaktiveer, deur die elektriese aktiwiteit van my neokorteks met die buitewêreld te sinchroniseer, net soos die meninges sou kon doen, en sodoende my buiteliggaamlike bewussyn vry te stel. Ek is oortuig dat Hemi-Sync my gehelp het om na 'n wêreld terug te keer wat ooreenstem met die een wat ek in my koma besoek het, maar sonder dat ek dodelik siek hoef te wees. Maar, soos in die drome oor vlieg wat ek as kind gehad het, is dit 'n proses wat toegelaat moet word om self te ontvou – as ek dit probeer forseer deur te veel daaroor te dink of te veel op die proses te konsentreer, dan werk dit nie.

Die woord *alwetend* voel nie vir my gepas nie, want die ontsag en skeppingskrag waarvan ek getuie was, was te groot om te omskryf. Ek het besef dat die verbod van sommige godsdienste om die naam van God te noem, of om die heilige profete uit te beeld, tog in sekere sin reg was. Die realiteit van God is heeltemal buite ons menslike vermoë om hier op aarde met woorde of beelde vas te vang.

Net soos my bewussyn tegelyk individueel en ook volledig een met die heelal was, so het die grense van wat ek as my "self" beskou het, soms saamgetrek, en andersins weer uitgebrei om alles in te sluit wat in alle ewigheid bestaan. Die vaagheid van die grens tussen my bewussyn en alles om my het soms so ver gegaan dat ek die heelal geword het. Anders gestel, ek het 'n eenheid met die heelal ervaar wat die hele tyd daar was, maar wat ek net nie raakgesien het nie.

'n Analogie wat ek dikwels gebruik om my bewussyn op daardie diepste vlak te illustreer, is dié van 'n hoendereier. Terwyl ek in die Kern was, selfs toe ek een geword het met die ligsfeer en die verhewe, ewigdurende heelal, en een was met God, het ek 'n sterk aanvoeling gehad dat God as skepper en oeroorsprong van alles die dop van die eier is en ten nouste aan die inhoud verbonde is, soos ons bewussyn 'n direkte uitvloeisel van die Opperwese is, maar dit steeds buite die vermoë van die geskape bewussyn is om volledig met die oorsprong te identifiseer. Selfs terwyl my bewussyn een geword het met die ewigheid, het ek aangevoel dat ek nie volledig een kon word met die skeppende oorsprong van alles wat bestaan nie. Aan die kern van die oneindige eenheid is daar steeds 'n dualiteit. Dit is moontlik dat hierdie oënskynlike dualiteit bloot die gevolg is van my pogings om daardie bewustheid in hierdie aardse bestaan te probeer oordra.

Ek het nooit die stem van Om regstreeks gehoor nie, en ook nie die gesig van Om gesien nie. Dit was asof Om met my gepraat het deur middel van gedagtes wat soos golwe deur my gegaan het, en alles om my laat skud het en gewys het dat daar 'n dieper bestaansvlak is – 'n vlak waarvan ons almal deel is, maar waarvan ons meesal nie bewus is nie.

Die vraag is, het ek direk met God gekommunikeer? Sonder twyfel. Dit klink miskien aanmatigend. Maar terwyl dit gebeur het, het dit heeltemal natuurlik gevoel. Ek het gevoel ek doen iets waartoe elke siel in staat is wanneer hulle die liggaam verlaat, en wat ons almal op hierdie oomblik kan doen deur verskillende soorte gebed en meditasie. Kommunikasie met God is die mees uitsonderlike ervaring denkbaar, maar dit is ook die mees natuurlike ervaring, want God is voortdurend in ons teenwoordig. Alwetend, almagtig, persoonlik – en die bron van onvoorwaardelike liefde. Ons is soos een met mekaar verbind deur ons heilige verbintenis met God.

34.

A Final Dilemma

I must be willing to give up what I am in order to become what I will be.

—Albert Einstein (1879–1955)

Einstein was one of my early scientific idols and the above quote of his had always been one of my favorites. But I now understood what those words actually meant. Crazy as I knew it sounded every time I told my story to one of my scientific colleagues—as I could see in their glazed or perturbed expressions—I knew I was telling them something that had genuine scientific validity. And that it opened the door to a whole new world—a whole new universe—of scientific comprehension. Observation that honored consciousness itself as the single greatest entity in all of existence.

But one common event in NDEs had not happened with me. Or, more accurately, there was a small group of experiences I had not undergone, and all of these clustered around one fact:

While out, I had not remembered my earthly identity.

Though no two NDEs are exactly alike, I'd discovered early on in my reading that there is a very consistent list of typical features that many contain. One of these is a meeting with one or more deceased people that the NDE subject had known in life. I had met no one I'd known in life. But that part didn't bother me so much, as I'd already discovered that my forgetting of my earthly identity had allowed me to move further "in" than many NDE subjects do. There was certainly nothing to complain about in that. What did bother me was that there was one person I would have deeply loved to have met. My dad had died four years before I entered coma. Given that he knew how I felt I had failed to measure up to his standards during those lost years of mine, why had he not been there to tell me it was okay? For comfort was, indeed, what the NDE subject's friends or family who greeted them were most often intent on conveying. I longed for that comfort. And yet I hadn't received it.

It wasn't that I hadn't received any words of comfort at all, of

course. I had, from the Girl on the Butterfly Wing. But wonderful and angelic as this girl was, she was *no one I knew*. Having seen her every time I entered that idyllic valley on the wing of a butterfly, I remembered her face perfectly—so much so that I knew I had never met her in my life, at least my life on earth. And in NDEs it was often the meeting with a known earthly friend or relation that sealed the deal for the people who had undergone these experiences.

Try as I did to brush it off, this fact introduced an element of doubt into my thoughts on what it all meant. It wasn't that I doubted what had happened to me. That was impossible, and I'd have just as soon doubted my marriage to Holley or my love for my kids. But the fact that I had traveled to the beyond without meeting my father, and met my beautiful companion on the butterfly wing, whom I didn't know, still troubled me. Given the intensely emotional nature of my relationship to my family, my feelings of lack of worth because I had been given away, why hadn't that all-important message—that I was loved, that I would never be thrown away—been delivered by someone I knew? Someone like . . . my dad?

For in fact, "thrown away" was, on a deep level, how I had indeed felt all through my life—in spite of all the best efforts of my family to heal that feeling through their love. My Dad had often told me not to be overly concerned about whatever had happened to me before he and Mom had picked me up at the children's home. "You wouldn't remember anything that happened to you that early anyhow," he'd said. And in that he'd been wrong. My NDE had convinced me that there is a secret part of ourselves that is recording every last aspect of our earthly lives, and that this recording process commences at the very, very beginning. So on a precognitive, preverbal level, I'd known all through my life that I'd been given away, and on a deep level I was still struggling to forgive that fact.

As long as this question remained open, there would remain a dismissive voice. One that told me, insistently and even deviously, that for all the perfection and wonder of my NDE, something had been missing, had been "off" about it.

In essence, a part of me still doubted the authenticity of my astonishingly real deep-coma experience, and thus of the true existence of that entire realm. To that part of me, it continued to "not make sense" from a scientific standpoint. And that small but insistent voice of doubt began to threaten the whole new worldview I was slowly building.

34.

’n Laaste Dilemma

I must be willing to give up what I am in order to become what I will be.
ALBERT EINSTEIN (1879-1955)

Einstein was vroeg reeds een van my helde in die wetenskaplike wêreld en hierdie aanhaling van hom was nog altyd een van my gunstelinge. Maar nou eers verstaan ek wat daardie woorde in werklikheid beteken. Elke keer dat ek my verhaal aan een van my wetenskaplike kollegas vertel het, het ek geweet dit klink vreemd en vergesog – ek kon dit aan hulle afgetrokke of verwarde gesigsuitdrukkings sien – maar ek het geweet ek vertel iets wat werklik wetenskaplik geldig is. En dit het ’n hele nuwe wêreld – ’n hele nuwe heelal – van wetenskaplike begrip oopgemaak. Waarneming wat bewussyn self as die grootste enkele verskynsel in ons ganse bestaan erken.

Daar is egter een algemene aspek van NDE’s wat ek nie ondervind het nie. Om meer presies te wees, daar is ’n paar aspekte wat ek nie ervaar het nie, en almal hou met een feit verband: Terwyl ek buite my liggaam was, het ek nie my aardse identiteit onthou nie.

NDE’s verskil almal in mindere of meerdere mate, maar ek het in my leeswerk agtergekom daar is ’n konsekwente lys tipiese kenmerke wat by die meeste voorkom. Een hiervan is ’n ontmoeting met een of meer gestorwenes wat die persoon met die NDE geken het. Ek het niemand teëgekom wat ek in my lewe geken het nie. Dié verskil het my nie soveel gepla nie, omdat ek agtergekom het dat die verlies van my aardse identiteit my juis toegelaat het om verder weg te beweeg as baie ander wat NDE’s gehad het. Dit was vir my heel aanvaarbaar. Wat my wel gepla het, is dat daar een persoon was wat ek baie graag sou wou ontmoet. My pa is vier jaar voor my koma oorlede. Hy het tog sekerlik geweet hoe ek gevoel het oor die feit dat ek in my “verlore jare” nie aan sy verwagtings voldoen het nie. Waarom was hy nie daar om my gerus te stel nie? Gerusstelling en troos is juis wat mense tydens ’n NDE die dikwelste van gestorwe vriende of familie

ontvang het. Ek het gesmag na daardie troos. En tog het ek dit nie ontvang nie.

Dit was nie asof ek glad nie troos ontvang het nie. Ek het dit natuurlik van die Meisie op die Vlindervlerk ontvang. Maar al was hierdie meisie hoe wonderlik en engelagtig, sy was *nie iemand wat ek geken het nie*. Ek het haar met elke besoek aan daardie idilliese vallei gesien en kon haar gesig goed onthou – goed genoeg om te weet dat ek haar nog nooit vantevore ontmoet het nie, altans nie in my lewe op aarde nie. Dit is dikwels juis hierdie ontmoetings met 'n bekende wat vir die persoon wat die NDE ondergaan die deurslag gee en hulle finaal oortuig.

Hoewel ek probeer het om nie te veel waarde daaraan te heg nie, het hierdie feit tog 'n mate van twyfel by my laat ontstaan oor wat dit alles beteken. Dit was nie asof ek getwyfel het oor wat met my gebeur het nie. Dit was onmoontlik, en ek kon net sowel oor my huwelik met Holley of my liefde vir my kinders getwyfel het. Maar die feit dat ek na die hiernamaals gereis het sonder om my pa te ontmoet, en 'n pragtige metgesel op die vlindervlerk ontmoet het wat ek glad nie geken het nie, het my tog gepla. Met inagneming van my intense emosionele verhouding met my familie, en my gebrek aan eiewaarde omdat ek weggegee is, waarom het daardie allerbelangrike boodskap – dat ek liefgehê word, dat ek nooit weggegooi sal word nie – nie gekom van iemand wat ek ken nie? Iemand soos … my pa?

Inderdaad, "weggegooi" is, hoe ek my hele lewe lank diep in my binneste gevoel het – ondanks my gesin se beste pogings om met hulle liefde daardie gevoel te verdryf. My pa het dikwels gesê ek moet my nie te veel kwel oor wat met my gebeur het voordat hulle my by die kinderhuis gaan haal het nie. "Jy sal tog niks kan onthou van wat so vroeg in jou lewe met jou gebeur het nie," het hy gesê. In daardie opsig was hy verkeerd. My NDE het my oortuig daar is 'n deel van ons wat alles onthou wat in ons lewe op aarde gebeur. Hierdie onthouproses begin reg aan die begin. Op 'n prekognitiewe en preverbale vlak het ek regdeur my lewe geweet dat ek weggegee is, en diep in my binneste het ek nog steeds gesukkel om daardie feit te aanvaar.

Solank hierdie vraag onbeantwoord bly, sou die afwysende stem daar wees. Een wat my gedurig daaraan herinner dat, al het ek 'n

besonderse en wonderbaarlike NDE gehad, daar tog iets geskort het.

’n Deel van my het nog steeds die egtheid van my verbasend werklike diepkoma-ervaring betwyfel, en dus ook die ware bestaan van die ander wêreld. Vir daardie deel van my het dit uit ’n wetenskaplike oogpunt nog nie sin gemaak nie. En daardie stem, die stem van twyfel in my agterkop, het gedreig om die hele nuwe wêreldbeskouing waaraan ek begin bou het af te breek.

35.

The Photograph

Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.

—CICERO (106–43 BCE)

Four months after my departure from the hospital, my birth family sister Kathy finally got around to sending me a photo of my birth sister Betsy. I was up in our bedroom, where my odyssey all began, when I opened the oversized envelope and pulled out a framed glossy color photo of the sister I had never known. She was standing, I would later find out, near the docking pier of the Balboa Island Ferry near her home in Southern California, a beautiful West Coast sunset in the background. She had long brown hair and deep blue eyes, and her smile, radiating love and kindness, seemed to go right through me, making my heart both swell and ache at the same time.

Kathy had affixed a poem over the photo. It was written by David M. Romano in 1993, and was called "When Tomorrow Starts Without Me."

When tomorrow starts without me,
And I'm not there to see,
If the sun should rise and find your eyes
All filled with tears for me;
I wish so much you wouldn't cry
The way you did today,
While thinking of the many things,
We didn't get to say.
I know how much you love me,
As much as I love you,
And each time you think of me,
I know you'll miss me too;
But when tomorrow starts without me,
Please try to understand,
That an angel came and called my name,

And took me by the hand,
And said my place was ready,
In heaven far above
And that I'd have to leave behind
All those I dearly love.
But as I turned to walk away,
A tear fell from my eye
For all my life, I'd always thought,
I didn't want to die.
I had so much to live for,
So much left yet to do,
It seemed almost impossible,
That I was leaving you.

I thought of all the yesterdays,
The good ones and the bad,
The thought of all the love we shared,
And all the fun we had.
If I could relive yesterday
Just even for a while,
I'd say good-bye and kiss you
And maybe see you smile.
But then I fully realized
That this could never be,
For emptiness and memories,
Would take the place of me.
And when I thought of worldly things
I might miss come tomorrow,
I thought of you, and when I did
My heart was filled with sorrow.
But when I walked through heaven's gates
I felt so much at home
When God looked down and smiled at me,
From His great golden throne,
He said, "This is eternity,
And all I've promised you.
Today your life on earth is past
But here it starts anew.
I promise no tomorrow,
But today will always last,

And since each day's the same way,
There's no longing for the past.
You have been so faithful,
So trusting and so true.
Though there were times
You did some things
You knew you shouldn't do.
But you have been forgiven
And now at last you're free.
So won't you come and take my hand
And share my life with me?"
So when tomorrow starts without me,
Don't think we're far apart,
For every time you think of me,
I'm right here, in your heart.

My eyes were misting as I put the picture carefully up on the dresser and continued to stare at it. She looked so strangely, hauntingly familiar. But of course, she *would* look that way. We were blood relations and had shared more DNA than any other people on the planet with the exception of my other two biological siblings. Whether we'd ever met or not, Betsy and I were deeply connected.

The next morning, I was in our bedroom reading more of the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross book *On Life After Death* when I came to a story about a twelve-year-old girl who underwent an NDE and at first didn't tell her parents about it. Finally, however, she could no longer keep it to herself and confided in her father. She told him about traveling to an incredible landscape full of love and beauty, and how she met and was comforted by her brother.

"The only problem," the girl told her father, "is that I don't have a brother."

Tears filled her father's eyes. He told the girl about the brother she did indeed have, but who had died just three months before she was born.

I stopped reading. For a moment I went into a strange, dazed space, not really thinking or not thinking, just . . . absorbing something. Some thought that was right on the edge of my consciousness but hadn't quite broken through.

Then my eyes traveled over to the bureau, and the photo that Kathy had sent me. The photo of the sister I had never known. Whom

I knew only through the stories that my birth family had related of what a hugely kind, wonderfully caring person she had been. A person, they had often said, who was so kind she was practically an angel.

Without the powder blue and indigo dress, without the heavenly light of the Gateway around her as she sat on the beautiful butterfly wing, she wasn't easy to recognize at first. But that was only natural. I had seen her heavenly self—the one that lived above and beyond this earthly realm, with all its tragedies and cares.

But now there was no mistaking her, no mistaking the loving smile, the confident and infinitely comforting look, the sparkling blue eyes.

It was she.

For an instant, the worlds met. My world here on earth, where I was a doctor and father and a husband. And that world out there—a world so vast that as you journeyed in it you could lose your very sense of your earthly self and become a pure part of the cosmos, the God-soaked and love-filled darkness.

In that one moment, in the bedroom of our house, on a rainy Tuesday morning, the higher and the lower worlds met. Seeing that photo made me feel a little like the boy in the fairy tale who travels to the other world and then returns, only to find that it was all a dream—until he looks in his pocket and finds a scintillating handful of magical earth from the realms beyond.

As much as I'd tried to deny it, for weeks now a fight had been going on inside me. A fight between the part of my mind that had been out there beyond the body, and the doctor—the healer who had pledged himself to science. I looked into the face of my sister, my angel, and I knew—knew completely—that the two people I had been in the last few months, since coming back, were indeed one. I needed to completely embrace my role as a doctor, as a scientist and healer, and as the subject of a very unlikely, very real, very important journey into the Divine itself. It was important not because of me, but because of the fantastically, deal-breakingly convincing details behind it. My NDE had healed my fragmented soul. It had let me know that I had always been loved, and it also showed me that absolutely everyone else in the universe is loved, too. And it had done so while placing my physical body into a state that, by medical science's current terms, should have made it impossible for me to have experienced *anything*.

I know there will be people who will seek to invalidate my experience anyhow, and many who will discount it out of court,

because of a refusal to believe that what I underwent could possibly be "scientific"—could possibly by anything more than a crazy, feverish dream.

But I know better. And both for the sake of those here on earth and those I met beyond this realm, I see it as my duty—both as a scientist and hence a seeker of truth, and as a doctor devoted to helping people—to make it known to as many people as I can that what I underwent is true, and real, and of stunning importance. Not just to me, but to all of us.

Not only was my journey about love, but it was also about who we are and how connected we all are—the very meaning of all existence. I learned who I was up there, and when I came back, I realized that the last broken strands of who I am down here were sewn up.

You are loved. Those words are what I needed to hear as an orphan, as a child who'd been given away. But it's also what every one of us in this materialistic age needs to hear as well, because in terms of who we really are, where we really came from, and where we're really going, we all feel (wrongly) like orphans. Without recovering that memory of our larger connectedness, and of the unconditional love of our Creator, we will always feel lost here on earth.

So here I am. I'm still a scientist, I'm still a doctor, and as such I have two essential duties: to honor truth and to help heal. That means telling my story. A story that as time passes I feel certain happened for a reason. Not because I'm anyone special. It's just that with me, two events occurred in unison and concurrence, and together they break the back of the last efforts of reductive science to tell the world that the material realm is all that exists, and that consciousness, or spirit—yours and mine—is not the great and central mystery of the universe.

I'm living proof.

Eternea

My near-death experience inspired me to help make the world a better place for all, and Eternea is the vehicle to enable that fundamental change. Eternea is a nonprofit publicly supported charity I cofounded with my friend and colleague, John R. Audette. Eternea represents a passionate effort to serve the greater good by helping to create the best possible future for earth and its inhabitants.

Eternea's mission is to advance research, education, and applied programs concerning spiritually transformative experiences, as well as the physics of consciousness and the interactive relationship between consciousness and physical reality (e.g., matter and energy). It is an organized effort to apply in practical ways not only the insights gained from near-death experiences, but also to serve as a repository for all manner of spiritually transformative experiences.

Please visit www.Eternea.org to further your own spiritual awakening or to share your own personal story about a spiritually transformative experience you may have had (or if you are grieving from the loss of a loved one, or if you are facing a terminal illness or a loved one is). Eternea will also provide a valuable resource for scientists, academicians, researchers, theologians, and members of the clergy who are interested in this field of study.

Eben Alexander, M.D.
Lynchburg, Virginia
July 10, 2012

Acknowledgments

I wish to especially acknowledge my dear family for suffering through the hardest part of this experience, while I was in coma. To Holley, my wife of thirty-one years, and our wonderful sons, Eben IV and Bond, who all played central roles in bringing me back, and in helping me comprehend my experience. Additional dear family and friends to thank include my beloved parents Betty and Eben Alexander, Jr., and my sisters Jean, Betsy, and Phyllis, who all participated in a pact (with Holley, Bond, and Eben IV) to hold my hand 24/7 while I was in coma, assuring that I always felt the touch of their love. Betsy and Phyllis did yeoman's work in spending nights with me during my full-blown ICU psychosis (when I couldn't sleep at all, *ever*) and in those first very tenuous days and nights after I went to the Neuroscience Step-down Unit. Peggy Daly (Holley's sister) and Sylvia White (Holley's friend of thirty years) were also part of the constant vigil in my room on the ICU. I never could have returned without their individual loving efforts to bring me back to this world. To Dayton and Jack Slye, who did without their mother, Phyllis, while she was with me. Holley, Eben IV, Mom, and Phyllis also helped in editing and critiquing my story.

My heaven-sent birth family, and especially my departed sister, also named Betsy, whom I never met in this world.

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Critical to my return were Michael Sullivan and Susan Reintjes.

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Fellow explorers of deep consciousness and the Oneness, including Elke Siller Macartney and Jim Macartney.

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excellent editorial advice, and Carolyn Tyler, for her soulful guidance in my understanding.

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My gratitude, most especially to God, is unbounded.

35.

Die Foto

Gratitude is not only the greatest of all virtues, but the parent of all others.
CICERO (106-43 VHJ)

Vier maande na my ontslag uit die hospitaal het my geboortesuster Kathy eindelik vir my 'n foto van ons suster Betsy gestuur. Ek was in ons slaapkamer, waar my reis oorspronklik begin het, toe ek die groot koevert oopmaak en die die foto uithaal: 'n geraamde kleurfoto op glanspapier, van die suster wat ek nooit geken het nie. Soos ek later sou verneem, staan sy op die foto naby die vasmeerplek van die Balboa-eilandveerboot in die omgewing van haar tuiste in Suid-Kalifornië. Sy het lang ligbruin hare en diepblou oë, en haar glimlag, wat liefde en vriendelikheid uitstraal, het regdeur my gegaan, en my hart tegelyk laat uitswel en laat pyn.

Kathy het 'n gedig bo-oor die foto geplak. Dit is in 1993 deur David M. Romano geskryf en die titel is: "When tomorrow starts without me".

When tomorrow starts without me,
And I'm not there to see,
If the sun should rise and find your eyes
All filled with tears for me;
I wish so much you wouldn't cry
The way you did today,
While thinking of the many things,
We didn't get to say.
I know how much you love me,
As much as I love you,
And each time you think of me,
I know you'll miss me too;
But when tomorrow starts without me,
Please try to understand,
That an angel came and called my name,
And took me by the hand,
And said my place was ready,
In heaven far above
And that I'd have to leave behind
All those I dearly love.
But as I turned to walk away,

A tear fell from my eye
For all my life, I'd always thought,
I didn't want to die.
I had so much to live for,
So much left yet to do,
It seemed almost impossible,
That I was leaving you.

I thought of all the yesterdays,
The good ones and the bad,
The thought of all the love we shared,
And all the fun we had.
If I could relive yesterday
Just even for a while,
I'd say good-bye and kiss you
And maybe see you smile.
But then I fully realized
That this could never be,
For emptiness and memories,
Would take the place of me.
And when I thought of worldly things
I might miss come tomorrow,
I thought of you, and when I did
My heart was filled with sorrow.
But when I walked through heaven's gates
I felt so much at home
When God looked down and smiled at me,
From His great golden throne,
He said, "This is eternity,
And all I've promised you.
Today your life on earth is past
But here it starts anew.
I promise no tomorrow,
But today will always last,
And since each day's the same way,
There's no longing for the past.
You have been so faithful,
So trusting and so true.
Though there were times
You did some things
You knew you shouldn't do.
But you have been forgiven
And now at last you're free.
So won't you come and take my hand
And share my life with me?

So when tomorrow starts without me,
Don't think we're far apart,
For every time you think of me,
I'm right here, in your heart.

My oë was vol trane toe ek die foto versigtig op die spieëlkas neersit en daarna bly kyk. Sy het so vreemd bekend gelyk. Maar natuurlik sou dit vir my so voel, want ons was per slot van sake bloedfamilie, ons het meer gemeenskaplike DNA gehad as enigiemand anders op die planeet, met die uitsondering van ons geboortesuster en -broer. Al het ons nooit ontmoet nie, was daar ’n diep verbintenis tussen ons.

Die volgende oggend lees ek in ons slaapkamer verder in Elizabeth Kübler-Ross se boek *On Life After Death*, en kom af op die verslag van ’n twaalfjarige meisie wat ’n NDE gehad het en aanvanklik nie vir haar ouers daarvan vertel het nie. Eindelik kon sy dit nie meer hou nie en het haar pa in haar vertroue geneem. Sy vertel hom toe van haar reis deur ’n wonderskone landskap vol liefde en skoonheid, en hoe haar broer haar ontmoet en getroos het.

“Al probleem is dat ek nie ’n broer het nie.”

Haar pa se oë het vol trane geskiet. Hy vertel haar toe van die broer wat sy gehad het, wat drie maande voor haar geboorte oorlede is.

Ek het ophou lees. ’n Oomblik lank het my gedagtes stilgestaan, ek het aan niks gedink nie en in die verte gestaar. Daar was ’n wete wat iewers op die randjie van my bewussyn gehuiwer het, maar nog net nie deurgebreek het nie.

Toe kyk ek weer na die foto op die spieëlkas. Die foto van ’n suster wat ek nooit geken het nie. Wat ek slegs ken deur die verhale wat my biologiese familie oor haar vertel het, van hoe ’n liefdevolle, sorgsame mens sy was. Iemand wat so goed was, het hulle dikwels gesê, dat sy eintlik ’n engel was.

Sonder die poeierblou en indigo rok, sonder die hemelse lig van die Poort om haar waar sy op die pragtige vlindervlerk gesit het, was sy aanvanklik nie maklik om te herken nie. Maar dit was te verstane. Ek het haar hemelse self gesien – die een wat verhewe was bo hierdie aardse bestaan met al sy ellende en sorge.

Maar nou het ek haar herken, die liefdevolle glimlag, die uitdrukking vol vertroue en vertroosting, die vonkelende blou oë.

Dit was sy.

’n Oomblik lank het die wêrelde ontmoet. My wêreld hier op aarde, waar ek ’n dokter, vader en eggenoot is. En die wêreld daar bo – ’n wêreld wat so groots is dat as mens daardeur reis jy jou aardse self verloor en ’n suiwer deel van die kosmos word, die Goddelike en

liefdevolle duisternis.

Op daardie oomblik, in die slaapkamer van ons huis, op ’n reënerige Dinsdagoggend, het die hoër en laer wêrelde ontmoet. Toe ek daardie foto sien, het ek gevoel soos die seuntjie in die sprokie wat na ’n towerwêreld reis en weer terugkeer, maar dan agterkom dit was alles net ’n droom – totdat hy sy hand in sy broeksak steek en ’n hand vol skitterende towersand afkomstig van die towerwêreld daar vind.

Al het ek dit probeer ontken, het ek die voorafgaande paar weke ’n innerlike stryd gevoer. ’n Stryd tussen dié deel van my wat buite my liggaam was, en die dokter – die geneser wat hom aan die wetenskap gewy het. Ek het na die gesig van my suster gekyk, my engel, en ek het geweet – vir seker geweet – dat die tweespalt wat daar in my was sedert ek teruggekeer het, opgelos is. Ek was weer heel. Nou moes ek my rol volstaan as dokter, as wetenskaplike en geneser, en as iemand wat ’n hoogs onwaarskynlike maar uiters werklike en uiters belangrike reis na die Opperwese onderneem het. Dit was nie net vir my belangrik nie, maar ook vanweë die deurslaggewende, oortuigende feite van die saak. My NDE het my gebroke siel genees. Dit het my laat besef dat ek nog altyd liefgehê is en dat elke liewe mens in die heelal ook liefgehê word. My liggaam is deur hierdie nabydood-ervaring in ’n toestand geplaas wat, uit die oogpunt van bestaande mediese kennis, dit vir my onmoontlik gemaak het om *enigiets* te ervaar.

Ek weet dat daar baie mense sal wees wat my ervaring op elke manier sal probeer weerlê, en baie wat dit by voorbaat sal verwerp, omdat hulle weier om te glo dat dit wat ek ervaar het enige wetenskaplike gronde het, dat dit enigiets meer is as ’n waansinnige koorsdroom.

Maar ek weet van beter. En ter wille van mense hier op aarde en dié wat ek in die ander wêreld ontmoet het, beskou ek dit as my plig – as wetenskaplike en dus soeker na die waarheid, en as dokter toegewy aan die genesing van mense – om dit soveel as moontlik mense bekend te maak dat wat ek ervaar het waar is, en werklik, en van die allergrootste belang. Nie net vir my nie, maar vir elkeen van ons.

My reis het nie net oor liefde gegaan nie, maar ook oor wie ons is en hoe ons almal aan mekaar verbonde is – die ware betekenis van alle bestaan. Daar bo het ek geleer wie ek is, en toe ek terugkom, het

ek besef die brokstukke van wie ek hier onder is, is nou weer heel.

Jy word liefgehê. Dit is woorde wat ek moes hoor, as weeskind, as kind wat weggegee is. Maar dit is ook wat elkeen van ons in hierdie materialistiese tyd moet hoor. As dit kom by vrae soos wie ons werklik is, waar ons werklik vandaan kom en waarheen ons werklik op pad is, voel ons almal (verkeerdelik) soos weeskinders.

Voordat ons nie weer ons verbondenheid met die groter geheel en die onvoorwaardelike liefde van ons Skepper besef nie, sal ons altyd hier op aarde verlore voel.

Hier is ek nou. Ek is nog steeds ’n wetenskaplike, ek is nog steeds ’n dokter, en as sodanig het ek twee basiese pligte: om die waarheid te eer en om te help genees. Dit beteken dat ek my verhaal moet vertel. Met verloop van tyd het ek al hoe meer oortuig geraak dat daar ’n rede is vir my ervaring. Nie omdat ek iemand besonders is nie, maar omdat, in my geval, twee gebeurtenisse gelyktydig en aanvullend plaasgevind het. Saam weerlê hulle finaal die basiese uitgangspunt van reduktiewe wetenskap en toon onweerlegbaar dat die materiële wêreld nie die enigste werklikheid is nie maar dat bewussyn, of gees – joune en myne – die grootse en sentrale misterie van die heelal is.

Ek is ’n sprekende bewys hiervan.

Endnote

1 Seventy percent is “dark energy,” that most mysterious force discovered by astronomers in the mid-1990s as they found incontrovertible proof based on Type Ia supernovas that for the last five billion years the universe has been falling *up*—that the expansion of all of space is *accelerating*. Another 26 percent is “dark matter,” the anomalous “excess” gravity revealed over the last few decades in the rotation of galaxies and galactic clusters. Explanations will be made, but the mysteries beyond will never end.

Appendix A

Statement by Scott Wade, M.D.

As an infectious diseases specialist I was asked to see Dr. Eben Alexander when he presented to the hospital on November 10, 2008, and was found to have bacterial meningitis. Dr. Alexander had become ill quickly with flu-like symptoms, back pain, and a headache. He was promptly transported to the Emergency Room, where he had a CT scan of his head and then a lumbar puncture with spinal fluid suggesting a gram-negative meningitis. He was immediately begun on intravenous antibiotics targeting that and placed on a ventilator machine because of his critical condition and coma. Within twenty-four hours the gram-negative bacteria in the spinal fluid was confirmed as *E.coli*. An infection more common in infants, *E. coli* meningitis is very rare in adults (less than one in 10 million annual incidence in the United States), especially in the absence of any head trauma, neurosurgery, or other medical conditions such as diabetes. Dr. Alexander was very healthy at the time of his diagnosis and no underlying cause for his meningitis could be identified.

The mortality rate for gram-negative meningitis in children and adults ranges from 40 to 80 percent. Dr. Alexander presented to the hospital with seizures and a markedly altered mental status, both of which are risk factors for neurological complications or death (mortality over 90 percent). Despite prompt and aggressive antibiotic treatment for his *E.coli* meningitis as well as continued care in the medical intensive care unit, he remained in a coma six days and hope for a quick recovery faded (mortality over 97 percent). Then, on the seventh day, the miraculous happened—he opened his eyes, became alert, and was quickly weaned from the ventilator. The fact that he went on to have a full recovery from this illness after being in a coma for nearly a week is truly remarkable.

—Scott Wade, M.D.

Bylaag A

Verklaring deur Scott Wade, MD

As ’n spesialis in aansteeklike siektes is ek gevra om dr Eben Alexander te ondersoek toe hy op 10 November 2008 by die hospitaal toegelaat is en met bakteriële meningitis gediagnoseer is. Dr Alexander het skielik siek geword met griepsimptome, rugpyn en ’n hoofpyn. Hy is by die noodeenheid opgeneem, waar ’n RT-skandering van die brein gedoen is, en daarna ’n lumbale punksie, met spinale vog wat op ’n Gram-negatiewe meningitis gedui het. Hiervoor is toepaslike intraveneuse antibiotika onmiddellik toegedien. Vanweë sy kritieke toestand en koma is hy is op ’n ventilator geplaas. Binne vier-en-twintig uur is die Gram-negatiewe bakterieë in die spinale vog as *E. coli* bevestig. *E. coli*-infeksie kom meer algemeen by babas voor en is uiters skaars in volwassenes (voorkoms in die VSA is minder as een in 10 miljoen per jaar), veral in die afwesigheid van koptrauma, neurochirurgie of ander mediese toestande soos diabetes. Dr Alexander was gesond tot voor die diagnose gemaak is en geen onderliggende oorsaak vir sy meningitis kon gevind word nie.

Die sterftesyfer vir Gram-negatiewe meningitis in kinders en volwassenes is tussen 40 en 80 persent. By sy aankoms het dr Alexander gepresenteer met konvulsies en ’n opmerklik aangetaste geestestoestand, wat in meningitis albei risikofaktore is vir neurologiese komplikasies en die dood (mortaliteit meer as 90 persent). Ondanks tydige en aggressiewe behandeling met antibiotika vir sy *E.coli*-meningitis asook volgehoue sorg in die intensiewesorgeenheid, was hy ses dae in ’n koma en hoop op ’n vinnige herstel het vervaag. Toe, op die sewende dag, het hy onverwags sy bewussyn herwin en sy oë oopgemaak. Hy is gou daarna van die ventilator gespeen. Die feit dat hy ten volle herstel het van hierdie siekte nadat hy byna ’n week lank in ’n koma was, is werklik merkwaardig.

Scott Wade, M.D.

Appendix B

Neuroscientific Hypotheses I Considered to Explain My Experience

In reviewing my recollections with several other neurosurgeons and scientists, I entertained several hypotheses that might explain my memories. Cutting right to the chase, they all failed to explain the rich, robust, intricate interactivity of the Gateway and Core experiences (the "ultra-reality"). These included:

1. A primitive brainstem program to ease terminal pain and suffering ("evolutionary argument"—possibly as a remnant of "feigned-death" strategies from lower mammals?). This did not explain the robust, richly interactive nature of the recollections.

2. The distorted recall of memories from deeper parts of the limbic system (for example, the lateral amygdala) that have enough overlying brain to be relatively protected from the meningitic inflammation, which occurs mainly at the brain's surface. This did not explain the robust, richly interactive nature of the recollections.

3. Endogenous glutamate blockade with excitotoxicity, mimicking the hallucinatory anesthetic, ketamine (occasionally used to explain NDEs in general). I occasionally saw the effects of ketamine used as an anesthetic during the earlier part of my neurosurgical career at Harvard Medical School. The hallucinatory state it induced was most chaotic and unpleasant, and bore no resemblance whatsoever to my experience in coma.

4. N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT) "dump" (from the pineal, or elsewhere in the brain). DMT, a naturally occurring serotonin agonist (specifically at the 5-HT1A, 5-HT2A and 5-HT2C receptors), causes vivid hallucinations and a dreamlike state. I am personally familiar with drug experiences related to serotonin agonist/antagonists (that is, LSD, mescaline) from my teen years in the early 1970s. I have had no personal experience with DMT but have seen patients under its influence. The rich ultra-reality would still require fairly intact auditory and visual

neocortex as target regions in which to generate such a rich audiovisual experience as I had in coma. Prolonged coma due to bacterial meningitis had badly damaged my neocortex, which is where all of that serotonin from the raphe nuclei in the brainstem (or DMT, a serotonin agonist) would have had effects on visual/auditory experience. But my cortex was off, and the DMT would have had no place in the brain to act. The DMT hypothesis failed on the basis of the ultra-reality of the audiovisual experience, and lack of cortex on which to act.

5. Isolated preservation of cortical regions might have explained some of my experience, but were most unlikely, given the severity of my meningitis and its refractoriness to therapy for a week: peripheral white blood cell (WBC) count over 27,000 per mm^3, 31 percent bands with toxic granulations, CSF WBC count over 4,300 per mm^3, CSF glucose down to 1.0 mg/dl, CSF protein 1,340 mg/dl, diffuse meningeal involvement with associated brain abnormalities revealed on my enhanced CT scan, and neurological exams showing severe alterations in cortical function and dysfunction of extraocular motility, indicative of brainstem damage.

6. In an effort to explain the "ultra-reality" of the experience, I examined this hypothesis: Was it possible that networks of inhibitory neurons might have been predominantly affected, allowing for unusually high levels of activity among the excitatory neuronal networks to generate the apparent "ultra-reality" of my experience? One would expect meningitis to preferentially disturb the superficial cortex, possibly leaving deeper layers partially functional. The computing unit of the neocortex is the six-layered "functional column," each with a lateral diameter of 0.2–0.3 mm. There is significant interwiring laterally to immediately adjacent columns in response to modulatory control signals that originate largely from subcortical regions (the thalamus, basal ganglia, and brainstem). Each functional column has a component at the surface (layers 1–3), so that meningitis effectively disrupts the function of each column just by damaging the surface layers of the cortex. The anatomical distribution of inhibitory and excitatory cells, which have a fairly balanced distribution within the six layers, does not support this hypothesis. Diffuse meningitis over the brain's

surface effectively disables the entire neocortex due to this columnar architecture. Full-thickness destruction is unnecessary for total functional disruption. Given the prolonged course of my poor neurological function (seven days) and the severity of my infection, it is unlikely that even deeper layers of the cortex were still functioning.

7. The thalamus, basal ganglia, and brainstem are deeper brain structures ("subcortical regions") that some colleagues postulated might have contributed to the processing of such hyperreal experiences. In fact, none of those structures could play any such role without having at least some regions of the neocortex still intact. All agreed in the end that such subcortical structures alone could not have handled the intense neural calculations required for such a richly interactive experiential tapestry.

8. A "reboot phenomenon"—a random dump of bizarre disjointed memories due to old memories in the damaged neocortex, which might occur on restarting the cortex into consciousness after a prolonged system-wide failure, as in my diffuse meningitis. Especially given the intricacies of my elaborate recollections, this seems most unlikely.

9. Unusual memory generation through an archaic visual pathway through the midbrain, prominently used in birds but only rarely identifiable in humans. It can be demonstrated in humans who are cortically blind, due to damaged occipital cortex. It provided no clue as to the ultra-reality I witnessed, and failed to explain the auditory-visual interleaving.

Bylaag B

Neurowetenskaplike hipoteses wat ek oorweeg het om my ervaring te

By die hersiening van my herinneringe saam met verskeie ander neurochirurge en wetenskaplikes het ek verskeie hipoteses oorweeg wat moontlik my herinneringe kon verklaar. Sonder omhaal van woorde moet ek sê dat nie een daarin slaag om die ryk, robuuste en ingewikkelde interaksie van die Poort- en Kernervarings (die "ultra-werklikheid") te verklaar nie. Die volgende hipoteses is oorweeg:

1. Primitiewe breinstam-programmering om terminale pyn en lyding te verlig, die "evolusie-argument" – moontlike oorblyfsel van "skyndood-strategieë" van laer soogdiere? Hierdie hipotese verklaar nie die robuuste, ryklik interaktiewe aard van die herinneringe nie.
2. Die verwronge opdiep van herinneringe uit dieperliggende dele van die limbiese sisteem (byvoorbeeld, die laterale amigdala), wat genoeg omringende breinweefsel het om relatief beskerm te wees teen die meningitisinflammasie, wat hoofsaaklik op die oppervlak van die brein voorkom. Hierdie hipotese verklaar nie die robuuste, ryklik interaktiewe aard van die herinneringe nie.
3. Endogene glutamaat-blok met eksitotoksisiteit, wat die hallusinogene anestetikum ketamien naboots (word soms gebruik om NDE's in die algemeen te verklaar). Ek het tydens my vroeë jare as neurochirurg by Harvard by geleentheid gesien wat die effek van ketamien as anestetikum is. Die hallusinose wat dit meebring, is chaoties en onaangenaam, en stem glad nie ooreen met my ervaring in koma nie.
4. N,N-dimetieltriptamien-"storting" (DMT) (afkomstig van die pineaalklier of elders in die brein). DMT, 'n serotonien-agonis wat in die natuur voorkom (spesifiek by die 5-HT1A, 5-HT2A en 5-HT2C reseptore) veroorsaak helder, intense hallusinasies en 'n droomtoestand. Ek het persoonlike ervaring van die uitwerking van middels wat met serotonienagoniste/antagoniste verband hou (dws LSD, meskalien), gedurende my tienerjare in die vroeë 1970's. Ek het geen persoonlike ervaring van DMT nie, maar het al pasiënte onder die invloed daarvan gesien. Die ryk ultra-werklikheid sou nog steeds redelik onaangetaste gehoor- en visuele funksies in die neokorteks vereis, as teikenareas waar die ryk oudiovisuele ervarings wat ek in koma gehad het, gegenereer kon word. Langdurige koma vanweë bakteriële meningitis het my neokorteks ernstig beskadig. Dit is waar die serotonien, afkomstig van die rafee-nukleï in die breinstam (of DMT, 'n serotonien-agonis), 'n uitwerking op oudiovisuele ervaring sou kon hê. Maar my korteks het nie gefunksioneer nie, en die DMT sou geen plek in die brein gehad het waarop dit 'n uitwerking sou kon gehad het nie. Die DMT-hipotese slaag nie, omdat dit nie die ultra-werklikheid van die oudiovisuele ervaring verklaar nie, en omdat daar geen korteks was waarop ingewerk kon word nie.

5. Geïsoleerde behoud van sommige kortikale areas sou sommige van my ervarings kon verklaar het, maar dit is baie onwaarskynlik, as die ernstige graad van my meningitis en die weerstandigheid teen behandeling in ag geneem word: perifere witbloedseltelling (WBS) meer as 27 000 per mm^3, 31 persent bandselle met toksiese granulasies, SSV WBS-telling meer as 4 300 per mm^3, SSV glukose af tot 1.0 mg/dl, SSV proteïene 1 340 mg/dl, diffuse meningeale aantasting met geassosieerde breinabnormaliteite wat op my kontras-breinskandering aangetoon is, en neurologiese ondersoeke wat ernstige aantasting van kortikale funksie aantoon, asook disfunksionele ekstra-okulêre beweging, wat 'n aanduiding van aantasting van die breinstam is.
6. In 'n poging om die "ultra-werklikheid" van die ervaring te verklaar, het ek die volgende hipotese ondersoek: Is dit moontlik dat inhiberende neuronnetwerke die meeste aangetas is, en buitengewoon hoë aktiwi-teitsvlakke van die eksitatoriese neuronnetwerke die oënskynlike "ultrawerklikheid" van my ervaring kon voortbring? Mens sou verwag dat meningitis by voorkeur die oppervlakkige korteks sou aantas, en dat die dieper lae moontlik gedeeltelik sou bly funksioneer. Die verwerkereenheid van die korteks is die "funksionele kolom" wat uit ses lae bestaan, elkeen met 'n laterale deursnit van 0,2-0,3 mm. Daar is heelwat laterale verbinding met naasliggende kolomme, in reaksie op regulerende beheerseine wat meesal van subkortikale areas afkomstig is (die talamus, basale ganglia en breinstam). Die anatomiese distribusie van inhiberende en eksitatoriese selle, wat 'n redelik gebalanseerde distribusie binne die ses lae het, steun nie hierdie hipotese nie. Vanweë hierdie kolomstruktuur sal diffuse meningitis regoor die oppervlakte van die brein die hele neokorteks aantas. Dit is dus nie nodig dat die volle diepte van die brein aangetas hoef te word om breinfunksie te ontwrig nie. As mens die duur van my swak neurologiese funksionering in ag neem (sewe dae) en die ernstige graad van my infeksie, is dit onwaarskynlik dat selfs die dieper lae van die korteks nog sou kon funksioneer.
7. Die talamus, basale ganglia en breinstam is dieper breinstrukture ("subkortikale areas") wat volgens die veronderstelling van sommige kollegas tot die prosessering van sodanige hiperwerklike gewaarwordinge kon bygedra het. Die waarheid is egter dat geen van hierdie strukture so 'n rol sou kon gespeel het sonder dat sommige van die areas van die neokorteks onaangetas gebly het nie. Uiteindelik het almal saamgestem dat hierdie subkortikale strukture alleen nie die intense neurale berekeninge sou kon uitvoer wat nodig is vir so 'n ryklik interaktiewe ervaring nie.
8. "Herlaaiverskynsel" – 'n ongekoördineerde storting van onverwante herinneringe afkomstig van die beskadigde neokorteks, wat mag plaasvind wanneer die korteks weer bewussyn herwin na 'n langdurige verlies van bewussyn, soos in die geval van my diffuse meningitis. As die kompleksiteit van my herinneringe in ag geneem word, blyk dit baie onwaarskynlik te wees.
9. Buitengewone geheue-aktiwiteit, deur 'n primitiewe visuele pad

deur die midbrein, wat veral in voëls gebruik word maar selde by mense geïdentifiseer word. Dit kan aangetoon word by mense wat kortikale blindheid het vanweë ’n beskadigde oksipitale korteks. Dit verskaf egter geen verklaring vir die ultra-werklikheid wat ek waargeneem het nie, en ook nie vir die gelaagde oudiovisuele gewaarwordinge nie.

Eternea

My nabydood-ervaring het my aangespoor om te help om die wêreld ’n beter plek vir almal te maak. Eternea is gestig om daardie fundamentele verandering moontlik te maak. Eternea is ’n openbare welsynsorganisasie sonder winsbejag wat ek en my vriend en kollega John R. Audette gestig het, en dit is ons opregte poging om die mensdom te dien deur te help om die bes moontlike toekoms vir die aarde en sy bewoners te verseker.

Eternea se missie is die bevordering van navorsing, opvoeding en toegepaste programme wat verband hou met geestelik transformerende ervarings, asook met die fisika van bewussyn en die interaktiewe verhouding tussen bewussyn en die fisiese werklikheid (bv. materie en energie). Dit is ’n gekoördineerde poging om praktiese toepassings te vind vir die insigte wat tydens nabydoodervaring verkry is, maar ook om rekord te hou van verskeie soorte geestelik transformerende ervarings.

Besoek gerus www.Eternea.org om jou eie geestelike ontwaking te bevorder of om jou verhaal oor ’n geestelik transformerende ervaring met ander te deel (of as jy ’n geliefde verloor het, of as jy of ’n geliefde ’n terminale siekte het). Eternea bied ook ’n waardevolle hulpbron vir wetenskaplikes, akademici, navorsers, teoloë en kerkleiers wat in hierdie studieveld belangstel.

Eben Alexander, MD
Lynchburg, Virginië

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